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The Net of Nostalgia: Class, Culture, and Political Alienation and Nostalgia in Contemporary Latino and South Asian American Literature

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The Net of Nostalgia: Class, Culture, and Political Alienation and Nostalgia in Contemporary
Latino and South Asian American Literature

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in English

by

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Abstract

Generally thought of as a yearning for recent past, or homesickness, nostalgia is seen as a sentiment that impairs living in the present. And in case of immigrants, nostalgia is thought of as a debilitating form of escapism and an inability to adapt to change and mobility. In this dissertation, contesting against the prevalent concept, I argue that immigrant nostalgia is neither a colored memory (Dyson 117) nor a romance with one's own fantasy (Boym xiii); rather, immigrant nostalgia has a socio-economic and political underpinning. By exploring the various nuances of immigrant experience delineated in the literary works of South Asian and Latino/a American writers from 1960 to the present, I explore the dynamics at work in generating nostalgia in the immigrant protagonists.

The central argument of this dissertation is that nostalgia that afflicts the protagonists of immigrant literature does not spring from any idealized or imagined version of the past, nor is it triggered by a uniquely experienced past; instead, nostalgia is a complex state of mind that is triggered by socio-political and cultural alienation. Close scrutiny of the immigrant experience depicted in the selected literary texts reveals that immigrants' dissatisfied and disconnected condition in the adopted land is responsible for their homesickness and nostalgia. However, I go beyond the discussion of the causes of nostalgia and show how their nostalgia is actually an intransigent desire for a secured and stable existence in the adopted land. I also highlight nostalgia's positive role in instrumenting the reformulation of the self that help the immigrant protagonists have a strong sense of themselves and their position in the adopted land.

The dissertation also examines the functions of immigrant novels in the contemporary globalized world and takes a broader critical approach in drawing a connection between the disenfranchisement of immigrants and their tendency toward nostalgia. Finally, I conclude by

arguing that the genre's preoccupations with the themes of nostalgia and cultural conflict may actually be read as attempts at representing the crises that immigrants go through in their process of adjusting to a new country.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my best friend, Afrin Zeenat.

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Introduction

One of the predominant trends in immigrant literature, particularly in novels, is the desire of the protagonists to reconnect to the homeland that they have left behind. Yearning and nostalgia for the past homeland play a crucial role in the literary texts concerned with the immigrant experience. Often the protagonists of such narrative texts are so consumed by nostalgia that it becomes difficult for them to adapt to the adopted country. Even when the protagonists of these texts are mostly brought up in the adopted land, they at some point of their life seem to have an ardent desire to go back to their land of origin. While some succeed in returning to their country of origin, many others lead their lives ensnared in the net of nostalgia. Despite our familiarity with the concept and emotion, nostalgia has proven difficult to define. Generally thought of as a yearning for recent past, or homesickness, nostalgia is in fact a complex word whose meaning has undergone multiple changes over the years. Raymond Williams has rightly said that it is a word whose meanings have altered as culture has changed; it is a disputed word that assumes different meanings as it moves from one discourse to another discourse¹. Numerous psychologists, sociologists, historians, and literary critics have tried to define and find the causes of nostalgia, but the term itself eschews facile definitions, as it conveys different meanings depending on the location, period, and academic perspective of the scholars writing about it. Sean Scanlan, in the special issue of *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* on nostalgia, has rightly said that nostalgia has “an uncanny ability to exceed any constraining definition” (1). Historian and geographer David Lowenthal argues that nostalgia is the current “catchword for looking back,” and that it is a way of remembering with the pain removed (*The*

¹ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford UP, 1976).

Past is a Foreign Country 4, 8). In a similar vein, historian Michael Kammen writes, “nostalgia, with its wistful memories, is essentially history without guilt” (626, 688). Taking an even more decidedly cynical stance on the matter, the late cultural critic Christopher Lasch belittled nostalgia as “the abdication of memory,” and suggested that it was a way of looking at the “past cut off from the present rather than entwined with it” (qtd. in Lear 61). Cultural critic Michael Eric Dyson further suggests that nostalgia “is colored memory. It is romantic remembering. It recreates as much as it reveals” (117).

Using the concept of nostalgia as a conceptual vehicle for examining core elements of contemporary immigrant literature, the proposed dissertation will argue, among other things, that the characteristic nostalgia that consumes the immigrants in the literary corpus I will be examining is neither “a colored memory” (Dyson 117) nor “a romance with one’s own fantasy” (Boym xiii), and certainly not a memory of the past that is cut off from the present. I also believe that to define immigrants’ nostalgia as a mere longing for lost home would be too narrow and restrictive; instead I argue that their nostalgia has a socio-economic and political underpinning. In fact, this dissertation will make a case for the rootedness of nostalgia and the verisimilitude of the conditions faced by many of the characters in the works considered. Through an analysis of a range of ethnic and immigrant writings published in the second half of the twentieth and the twenty first century by Latin American and South Asian American writers, I argue in this project that the nostalgia that afflicts the protagonists of immigrant literature does not spring from any idealized or imagined version of the past, nor is it triggered by personally experienced past; rather the motivational source of their nostalgic experience lies in the present. In this project I am particularly interested in finding the dynamics that trigger their nostalgia. And I anticipate that what this project will uncover is a degree of social alienation that is exacerbated by cultural,

linguistic, economic, and political factors in the United States, factors that are at times orchestrated by—rather than incidental outcomes of—the social majority. The recognition of these factors moves us away from thinking of nostalgia as an individualized, internal, isolated emotion, and instead forces us to think of it as a social malaise that hinders immigrants from feeling entirely fulfilled and compels them to seek the refuge of an idealized home.

The term nostalgia comes from the Greek word *nostos* meaning to return home and *algia* meaning painful condition, thus a painful yearning to return home. Contrary to general perception, the concept of nostalgia came from the field of medicine, and not from poetry or politics (Boym 3). The term was first coined by Swiss medical student Johannes Hofer in his medical dissertation in 1688, to talk about severe homesickness. In the late seventeenth century, the term was meant to designate a familiar condition of extreme homesickness among Swiss mercenaries fighting far from their native land (Davis 1). According to seventeenth and eighteenth century physicians, this disorder of the imagination was seen as a severe illness that could and did kill the patient. David Lowenthal in his book *The Past is a Foreign Country*, writes, “seventeenth century nostalgia was a physical rather than a mental complaint, an illness with explicit symptoms and often lethal consequences [...]. To leave home for long was to risk death” (10). As late as 1946, nostalgia was considered a “psycho-physiological” disease that was possibly fatal. By the nineteen-fifties, the word began to lose its medical meaning and was subsequently “demilitarized,” “demedicalized” and “depsychologized” (Davis 4, 5). That is, whatever residual connotations of aberrance or mental malfunction may have clung to the word following its habitation of two centuries in the realm of psychiatry, these too were rapidly dissipated through positively tinged popular and commercial usage (Davis 4, 5). Nostalgia now is, according to sociologist Fred Davis, “much more likely to be classed with familiar emotions

as love, jealousy, and fear than with such ‘conditions’ as melancholia, obsessive compulsions or claustrophobia” (5). Although the term originated in the medical profession, it has long ago crossed the boundaries of medical profession and has entered the terrain of writers and poets. Its allusion can be traced even before it was coined in the seventeenth century, in Homer’s *The Odyssey*, for instance, we are told that Odysseus cried and rolled on the ground when thinking of returning to his homeland, Ithaca. Given its integral role in narratives that have moving, uprooting and exile as their foundational events, nostalgia is, not surprisingly, an intrinsic part of immigrant literature that has at its center the dislocation and relocation of people.

Nostalgia and immigrant experience are correlated. When immigrants leave the familiarity of home and hearth and venture into the unknown with hopes to make a new home, they know quite well that they may never return to the old country. Even when people leave behind their homeland with a bitter experience, upon their arrival in the new country, they often find themselves remembering the positive aspects of their homeland and keep wandering back to their homeland through nostalgic reminiscence. From my readings of the literary texts, I have come to the conclusion that instead of obscuring “the connections between the past and the present” (Lasch 14), the literary renditions of immigrants’ nostalgia connect the past and the present for the immigrant characters; that is, the cause of the characters’ nostalgic remembrance of the past lies in the present situation. The various representations of immigrants in the literary corpora here considered suggest that when immigrants come to the new land they are greeted with a host of sentiments ranging from unfamiliarity to hostility. Venturing into a new territory, leaving behind all that is known—home, family and friends—is understood to be quite traumatizing, but this trauma is further intensified when immigrants are confronted with the hostile milieu of the new country. The literary representations of immigrants capture key aspects

of the immigrant experience in the new land, such as often not only being ridiculed for their way of life, language and even their appearance, but also being ostracized and forced to live in their own enclaves. In addition, they are pushed to liminality and are barred from active participation in the socio-economic and political arenas. Close scrutiny of the immigrant experience depicted in the literary texts reveals that their prevailing dissatisfied and disconnected condition in the adopted land is responsible for their homesickness and nostalgia. Beyond the literary representations themselves, the claim that immigrants' nostalgia germinates from their present condition can be backed by the work of Fred Davis, who in his seminal book *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* asserts that nostalgia's sources always "reside in the present, regardless of how much the ensuing nostalgic experience may draw its sustenance from our memory of the past" (9).

In this dissertation I bring under my analysis novels depicting the experiences of two different immigrant populations in the U.S.—those hailing from South Asian countries and those coming from Latin American countries—to show how nostalgia, as a phenomenon, functions in parallel ways at least among immigrants from these broad geographical regions. I have selected the immigrant literature of these two groups because starting from 1960 to the present time these countries account for the largest waves of immigration to the U.S. and for the largest immigrant populations in the country. According to SAALT, South Asian Americans Leading Together, South Asian Americans are the fastest growing major ethnic group in the United States, increasing by 81% from 2000 to 2010 to approximately 3.4 million people². Similarly, since 1960, the nation's Latino population has increased nearly nine fold, from 6.3 million to 55.3

² South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT), *A Demographic Snapshot of South Asians in the United States* (July 2012) available at AAF, <http://saalt.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Demographic-Snapshot-Asian-American-Foundation-20121.pdf>.

million by 2014 which comprises 17.3% of the total U.S. population (Stepler and Brown). Being the largest immigrant groups their contribution to the U.S. labor force is immense, but despite that fact, they are not completely integrated into the mainstream. As members of developing countries they are generally disparaged in the U.S., and the unequal power distribution between the immigrant groups and the host country predisposes the migrant groups to a feeling of inferiority and alienation. Moreover, both groups' colonial histories and positions of economic disadvantage in relation to the United States establish a basis of comparison between them that is initially unapparent. Another reason for bringing the works of South-Asian American writers and U.S. Latino/a writers together is to demonstrate how alienation and nostalgia may affect all immigrants regardless of their geographical differences. Hence, through a close analysis particularly of Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, Ernesto Quiñonez' *Bodega Dreams*, Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban*, Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Helena María Viramontes' *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Meena Alexander's *Manhattan Music: A Novel*, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*, Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat: A Novel*, Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and V.V. Ganeshanathan's *Love Marriage: A Novel* this project will focus on the complex web of issues—cultural and linguistic othering, economic deprivation, political marginalization, and racialization—that contribute to this feeling of alienation and the desire to repatriate that is commonly thought of as immigrant nostalgia. In order to understand representations of the immigrant experience in the U.S., we have to consider how immigration has historically been perceived in the U.S. context.

The American Way of Thinking about Immigration

The assimilatory pattern that is part of the mythology of immigration in America (the idea that people come here as aliens, and eventually—but perhaps not until the second generation—join the throng of assimilated Americans) is not only problematic but also unrealistic. The melting pot ideology developed in the eighteenth century expected all immigrants to assimilate into the American mainstream regardless of their national origin, race or culture. Although sociological studies such as Michael Novak's *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* and Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan's *Beyond the Melting Pot* have pointed out the “myth of the melting pot” (Payant xiv), the prevalence of the idea in popular thought led to the subjection of immigrants to discrimination because of the differences they clearly represented. The persistence of the myth in the collective consciousness has given rise to more complex problems in the case of new immigrants who try to absorb the mores and norms of the new culture while preserving their native cultures. Not only does the clash between cultures provoke a tension and confusion that usually has negative consequences, but this anxiety is aggravated by the prevailing socio-economic and political discrimination immigrants commonly face. Hence, even if they want to leave the past behind and embrace the norms of the adopted country, various factors preclude them from integrating into the mainstream. The literary corpora being considered offer depictions of the immigrant experience that are in line with such sociological accounts. As a result of passive or active exclusion, it is apparent that at some point of their life the immigrant characters face a crisis of identity and social disconnection. Although they try to negotiate a new space for themselves, they experience a sense of dislocation that is not entirely of their own making, and this sense of dislocation and exclusion culminates in the desire to reconnect or go back to the homeland. They take refuge in the realm of nostalgia where they

create a pure, structured and harmonious past in contrast to their fragmented world of the present. This idyllic picture of the land left behind is actually the result of their present fears, discontents, anxieties, or uncertainties, even though they may not be in the forefront of awareness (Davis 34).

In addition, the dissertation will also argue that the genre's preoccupations with the themes of nostalgia and cultural conflict may actually be read as attempts at the representations of the crises and mistreatment that immigrants go through in their process of adjusting to the new country. Although the literary works may not be acerbic in their criticism of the mainstream's domination in the U.S. context, they subvert the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority's supremacy by unveiling the various forms of discrimination that immigrants and ethnic minorities are subject to. Informed by the theoretical perspective of Fredric Jameson's "political unconscious," I will explain how novels focusing on the immigrant experience use textual representations to identify the problems of alienation and use their literary frameworks to voice objections to persistent socio-political subjugation and racial discrimination. At the same time, using the theories of Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Saez I will refute the prevalent claim that immigrant and ethnic literature has become a commodification of ethnic experiences and cultures. Rebutting the critics who view immigrant literature only as auxiliary, I concur with Sam Girgus that the new immigrant and ethnic novel:

names and confronts the power of the dominant culture to suppress, overcome, or absorb minority literature and culture. Refusing to disguise or minimize the cost or damage to minority culture in its encounter with hegemonic values, ideals, and ambitions, the new ethnic novel eschews easy generalizations about cultural pluralism. It presents ethnic texts as sites of inherent tension within novelistic representation between realistic documentation of minority experience and political representation that voices minority interests. (58)

Laying bare the sites of tension and highlighting the numerous forms of discrimination, immigrant novels function as a means of encouraging revision of the mainstreams' views regarding nationhood and immigration. I thereafter conclude by reinforcing the functions of this genre in the twenty first century globalized world.

Contributions to the Field

Although numerous articles, dissertations, and books have been written on the immigrant experience, most of these works consist of investigations related to racial and ethnic identity formation. Particular emphasis is given to racism, discrimination, cultural value conflicts, cultural continuity, ethnic attachments, and identity crisis. While a fair amount of research has been conducted on the trauma of dislocation and diaspora, few works have focused on nostalgia. The works that have been conducted on nostalgia projected nostalgia as a painful and romantic sentiment surrounding the loss of home; other works on nostalgia indicated nostalgia as a coping strategy for dealing with loss. Of those works, a prominent work that explores nostalgia as a coping strategy and a contributor in the identity formation of immigrants is literary critic Andreea Deciu Ritivoi's *Yesterday's Self: Nostalgia and the Immigrant Identity*. In this book Ritivoi explores the interconnectedness of nostalgia, identity and the immigrant experience. In particular, she tries to explore how immigrants deal with the transition from their culture of origin to the culture of adoption. Her broader concern is with the relation between homesickness or nostalgia and adjustment to new sociocultural contexts. In her view "homesickness plays a crucial role, by creating and stimulating an awareness of personal history, identity patterns, alternatives, and necessities" (3). Referring to Svetlana Boym's restorative and reflective nostalgia, Ritivoi states that while one form of nostalgia can create hindrance in the process of

adjustment, the other, a more productive form, can function as “an interpretive stance in which a person is aware of the element of discordance in her life” (165), enabling immigrants to suture the self to new surroundings. Hence, instead of seeing “nostalgia as a fatal disease” Ritivoi views “nostalgia as an instance of self- reflection” (6) which involves philosophical assumptions about the nature of personal identity. According to Ritivoi, nostalgia encourages immigrants to see the contingent nature of personal identity as a conclusion, rather than a premise, and the search for developing a sense of one’s self as a constantly renewed and renewable process (170).

While Ritivoi explores the concept of nostalgia that mandates a “constant search for the self, an effort to define and redefine identity by pondering its prior stages of manifestation, and by finding connections between the past and the present, as well as anticipating the future” (10), her work does not explore the sociopolitical and cultural subjugation that immigrants tend to experience and struggle with to be integrated in the adopted land. Instead of emphasizing nostalgia’s contribution to the identity formation of immigrants, I am interested in discovering whether the literary texts from the two traditions examined offer material that moves beyond identity formation and actually allow for the consideration of the causes of immigrant nostalgia. In my proposed project, through close scrutiny of the selected texts, I draw a connection between the immigrant protagonists’ present estrangement and nostalgia, and claim that this forced distancing from all spheres of life prompts them to look backward to the distant land in nostalgic reminiscence. Since the previous scholarly works about nostalgia are about European immigrants’ nostalgia for their homeland, my dissertation proposes a new dimension in the field by focusing on contemporary immigrants in the U.S. context, particularly Latino Americans and South Asian American immigrants. For the theoretical studies on nostalgia, at various points I rely on Fred Davis’ elaborate discussion on nostalgia and its functions in *Yearning for Yesterday*:

A Sociology of Nostalgia, Russian theorist Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia*, and Janelle L. Wilson's *Nostalgia: A Sanctuary of Meaning*.

Overview of the Dissertation

Chapter One: Alienation, the Nurturing Ground for Nostalgia

The project begins with a chapter titled, "Alienation, the Nurturing Ground for Nostalgia" that draws a connection between immigrant experience and nostalgia. In this chapter I delve into the center of the problem of nostalgia and try to find answers to why immigrants wax nostalgic, and whether their nostalgia is a mere longing for the past home, or whether there are more complexities associated with it; that is, whether there is something amiss in their present life that compels them to be nostalgic. Hence, through my research I conclude, concurring with cultural critic Stuart Tannock, that "[t]he nostalgic subject turns to the past to find/construct sources of identity, agency, or community, that are felt to be lacking, blocked, subverted, or threatened in the present" (454). The fact that the protagonists are lost in nostalgic memories thus indicates that they are removed from the ideal situation in the present. By analyzing Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's short story "Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs" in *Arranged Marriage*, I will demonstrate that the nostalgia of the protagonists of these texts has its root in the social, economic, and political alienation of immigrants. In fact their nostalgia is instrumental in unveiling their present condition. The chapter opens with a brief overview of the dynamics at work behind the host country's unreceptive attitude towards the immigrants in the literary works considered, and then moves on

to discuss how socio-economic stagnation and political repression engender nostalgia amid the protagonists.

One of the reasons the dominant culture adopts an exclusionary attitude towards its immigrant population is its proclivity for creating a “pure nation.” In “The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the U.S.A.,” Conzen, Gerber, Morawska, Pozzetta, and Vecoli observe that at the onset of mass immigration in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the United States also contemplated establishing itself as a nation based on homogeneity and nationality: “Americans themselves were engaged in a self-conscious project of inventing a national identity, and in the process found themselves also inventing the category of ethnicity—‘nationality’ was the term they actually used—to account for the culturally distinctive groups in their midst” (6). Hence, despite the melting pot strategy—which initially served to encapsulate the belief that the combined effects of the egalitarian ideals of the United States and the mixing of all immigrant and ethnic cultures would create a new “American” culture—“American” and “American culture” came to be imagined exclusively in white Anglo-American cultural terms (Oboler 27, 28). The reason behind such exclusion is the notion of building a socially uniform nation, and in analyzing this exclusionary attitude I will rely on the views expressed by social anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, who in his book *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger*, pins down the fears—the fear of morphing into minority group, and the fear of losing ‘total purity’ in creating a homogenous nation—that instigate the majority group to adopt an exclusionary attitude towards the minority groups. According to Appadurai, minorities quickly become a problem in a modern global context because they challenge national narratives of social cohesion and homogeneity. Their mere existence represents an obstacle to ‘total purity’ and this makes the minority the object of social rage. The “social rage” of the hegemonic group

is often expressed through subjecting the members of the minority group, whether they are immigrants or ethnics, to racism and socio-economic and political marginalization. I will also use Benedict Anderson's notion of "nation" and "nationalism" as being "constructed" or "invented," as articulated in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* to indicate the falsity of the desire of creating a homogeneous nation based on certain kinds of similarities. The overarching goal in this chapter is to unravel the various forms of suffering and discrimination that immigrants face in social, cultural or political arenas, all of which ultimately elicit the feeling of alienation that leads to the emergence of nostalgia.

At the center of my discussion about racialism and socio-economic and political subjugation would be Iris Marion Young's institutional racism theory, which explains how society in multifarious ways still nurtures racialism and cultural imperialism against the disempowered. In her book *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Young theorizes five types of oppression and illustrates how minority groups are and have been affected by each type. In her view, racial oppression occurs in the form of marginalization; it is through marginalization that a whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination (Young 53). At this juncture, I will be drawing textual references from *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* to argue how immigration curtails their possibilities socially and economically. Such depiction proposes that coming to America strips them of their status and power. Similarly, despite living in the United States for a long period, Oscar and his mother Belicia in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* do not get much opportunity for social and economic upward mobility; likewise, Biju in *The Inheritance of Loss* is exploited by the capitalist world for its own benefit. Additionally, immigrants are often depicted as people barred from contributing in the political arena. Thus in

this chapter, using the theories of Stuart Tannock, Fred Davis and Svetlana Boym on nostalgia, I will argue that exclusion from first-class citizenship, rights, and equal protection under the law, and the inability to exercise rights and power and participate in government, results in a sense of alienation in the protagonists, leading them to be nostalgic.

Chapter Two: Burden of Culture and Nostalgia

Placing *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents*, and *Manhattan Music: A Novel* at the center, chapter two, “Burden of Culture and Nostalgia,” explores how the protagonists, despite negotiating their own culture in accordance to the hegemonic culture, are engulfed in a feeling of estrangement which contributes to their nostalgia. In this chapter, I will attempt to find answers to questions like what role one’s culture plays in the process of adjusting to the new country and how it impacts assimilation. Does attachment to one’s native culture preclude or influence adjustment to a new culture, and thus the ability to understand a new culture and function in it? What factors give rise to the feeling of loss and vulnerability of immigrant characters and thereby contribute to the feelings of alienation that presumably lead them to feel nostalgic?

Among a multitude of adjustments, one of the key adjustments that immigrants have to make is the adjustment to culture. This cultural adjustment includes giving up old norms and values and embracing new ideas and ways of living. Adjustments very often have to be made in behavior, language, dress-up, cultural and political values, and participation in social and political organizations. The members of the hegemonic culture, in Young’s view, by projecting their own culture and experiences as representative of humanity and worth emulating, separate themselves from the other groups who have different norms and culture. In this way the

dominant group empowers itself while excluding and silencing the experiences and interpretation of social life of the other groups. And one way of coming out of that invisibility for the ethnic minority group is the negotiation of cultural identities.

The process of cultural identity negotiation is by no means a negotiation of equality by which the immigrants inscribe within themselves the cultural norms of both cultures equally. The power of the hegemonic group definitely affects this process of negotiation, leading the ethnic minority to accept the majority of hegemonic customs while forsaking most of their cultural heritage to facilitate integration. Theoretically, cultural assimilation does not demand uniformity in all areas of culture, but pragmatically the dominant culture practices the opposite by allowing only certain particularities of one's cultural heritage to exist, as long as they do not pose a burden or threat to the institutional framework. Although Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* articulates that "the very concepts of homogenous national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or 'organic' ethnic communities—as the grounds of cultural comparativism—are in a profound process of redefinition" (5), the dominant culture continues to rely on the concept of homogenous national culture. And, the immigrant groups respond to the demands of loyalty and conformity to "American" norms by demonstrating the compatibility of their ethnocultures with national ideals. Drawing on Mary Louise Pratt's concept of "contact zone," which she defines as "the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict," (6) I demonstrate how the immigrant protagonists become their own agents of ethnic subjectivity and negotiate and renegotiate their national and cultural ideology and identity to integrate themselves into the social fabric of the country they call home now.

But the process of negotiation or transition from their culture to the dominant culture, termed as transculturation by Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz in his book *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, is wrought with fear and anxiety. Depending on Ortiz and Michael M. J. Fischer's discussion of ethnic anxiety, I will identify the causes of such anxiety and fear that consume the immigrant protagonists. Subsequently, I will move on to show that their assimilative efforts, however, do not guarantee them full entrance into the American life. This results in the limitation of the immigrants' sphere of social participation through the loss of roles and through the lack of various institutional channels of communication with the larger society. These issues appear to be acknowledged in the literary representations of the Latino and South-Asian immigrant experience, and such representations bring to light the fact that despite living in America for multiple generations, the protagonists are not absorbed into American life socially and culturally. The chapter thus, highlighting Yolanda, the central character of *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents*, and Sandhya, the protagonist of *Manhattan Music: A novel*, will show how in spite of their attempt to reshape themselves by inculcating in them the culture of their host country, they are not integrated into the mainstream. Their transition from the culture of origin to the culture of adoption, no doubt a tortuous one, is exacerbated by social segregation and cultural isolation, both of which consequently generate feelings of ambivalence and rootlessness, which in turn often lead to homesickness and nostalgia.

Chapter Three: Panacea for Nostalgia: The Paradox of Returning Home

Permanently returning to, or visiting the homeland is considered to be the panacea for nostalgia. But will a return to the native land, to the familiar friends and family ensure peace and satisfaction? What happens when homesick and nostalgic people go back to their land of origin?

These are the areas of my research in the third chapter, “Panacea for Nostalgia: The Paradox of Returning Home.” On the basis of several shared plot features and characters’ points-of-view across the narratives considered, I claim that although immigrants are nostalgic for their homeland, their nostalgia is not linked to any geographical borders, but rather it is a longing for the past time; that is, immigrant nostalgia is actually temporal rather than spatial, and, in keeping with the irretrievability of time, nostalgia is essentially an illusion that functions as a coping mechanism until it prompts real action—such as the physical return to the homeland—that unmasks the mechanism for what it is. I further propose that nostalgia and yearning to go back necessitates a constant search for the self and thus act in forging a future based on stable identity.

The characters in the body of literature I will be considering in this chapter reveal the functions and pitfalls of nostalgia. Yolanda, the protagonist of Julia Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, Juani, in Achy Obejas’ *Memory Mambo*, and Nestor, the co-protagonist in Oscar Hijuelos’s *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, Pilar, the young protagonist of *Dreaming in Cuban*, Tara, the central character of Bharati Mukherjee’s *Desirable Daughters*, or Feroza in *An American Brat: A Novel* to name just a few, all yearn to return home in order to counteract the sense of alienation and fragmentation they encounter while living in the U.S. Although they try to negotiate a new space for themselves, they experience a sense of dislocation and alienation. And this sense of dislocation culminates in the desire of reconnecting or going back to the homeland. But once they go back to their native land, they are faced with another predicament. Nostalgia may propel them toward a lost past, but ironically, when they reach the homeland—the land that frequented their nostalgia—they are driven toward the next level of dissatisfaction. They realize that they cannot really adjust to their surroundings; sadness enshrouds them as they painfully come to the realization that they really belonged to the U.S. and

thus want to come back to their adopted land. To escape from the antagonism and isolation of their present life, they create an idyllic picture of their past homeland. In literary theorist Linda Hutcheon's words, "the simple, pure, ordered, easy, beautiful, or harmonious past" is constructed (and then experienced emotionally) in conjunction with the present, which, in turn, is "constructed as complicated, contaminated, anarchic, difficult, ugly, and confrontational" (195). Hence, when they return, the disparity between the real and the idealized fractures their longing, and they consequently want to come back to their present home—the U.S. However, as Immanuel Kant notes, people who return home are usually disappointed because, in fact, they do not want to return to a *place*, but to a *time*, a time of youth. Time, unlike space, cannot be returned to—ever; time is irreversible (Hutcheon 194). And nostalgia becomes the reaction to that sad fact. Hence, their nostalgia is not for a place, but a longing for time, the left behind time spent in their native land.

I will further investigate how nostalgia instigates the search for continuity and stable identity of the immigrant protagonists. By reconnecting to the land of origin they attempt to reformulate their identity, which has undergone destabilization in contact with the dominant culture of the adopted land. In this chapter I will use Stuart Tannock's theory of retrieval nostalgia and Gustavo Pérez Firmat's theory of immigrant integration as the framework for examining the various functions of nostalgia. Each section of this chapter will allude to the stages Pérez Firmat traces for immigrant identity formation, but each will do so in light of the economic, political, cultural, or emotional aspect devoted to the chapter and the representative texts covered therein. Pérez Firmat, in his book *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way*, has outlined a three-stage evolution in the lives of immigrant groups. The first stage is "substitutive," when one tries to reduplicate "home." The second stage is "destitution," a feeling

of alienation and rootlessness, a feeling in immigrants “that the ground has been taken out from under them, that they no longer know their place, that they have in fact lost their place” (10). And finally, there is “institution,” “the establishment of a new relation between person and place” (11). Yolanda, Juani, Pilar, Feroza are all in the second stage of “destitution” where they are gnawed by the feeling of rootlessness. Paradoxically, only by revisiting the land of origin can they rid themselves of the desire to claim it as their own. The visit helps immigrants come to an understanding of their bicultural uniqueness, and this leads them to the third stage that is establishing a new relation to their host community. And for those who cannot return to the native land, nostalgia becomes their means of recreating the past in their thoughts of home, from where they get sustenance to move forward. For the exile, a secure sense of self seems to be located exclusively and paradoxically in the past. Going back helps the protagonist to connect the past with the present, which gives him/her a strong sense of self and identity. Thus they travel to the land of origin, either physically or mentally, in search of a stable South Asian/ or Latino/a identity that can help them to construct their present American identity.

Chapter Four: Functions of Immigrant Novels in a Globalized Twenty-first Century

The final chapter, as the title indicates, “Functions of Immigrant Novels in a Globalized 21st Century,” aims at emphasizing the pertinence of this literary corpus in the contemporary globalized world. In this chapter, by deconstructing literary works of Helena María Viramontes’ *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Ernesto Quiñónez’s *Bodega Dreams*, Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, and V.V. Ganeshananthan *Love Marriage: A Novel*, I illustrate the function and the relevance of this branch of literature. Centering my research on Jameson’s theory of “political unconscious” as explained in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially*

Symbolic Act, and the work of Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez in their book *The Latino/a Canon and the Emergence of Post-Sixties Literature* I will show how the ways in which narrators portray people and events in their narratives inevitably have ideological subtexts and political and cultural implications thereby negating the accusation of immigrant literature as being “apolitical” and a commodification of immigrant and ethnic experiences.

In analyzing the texts to expose the hegemony of the dominant class, I will be using Jameson’s “mediated reading” theory, which will aid me in revealing both the surface level of a text and its ‘unconscious’ socio-political reading. Apparently all immigrant or ethnic novels may seem to depict some common themes of migration, predicaments of settling in a new environment, assimilation and nostalgia, but a dialectical mediation of all texts will reveal the unconscious anxieties buried below these common themes. Jameson’s mediatory reading will lead me to discern the cause of nostalgia and trace its root in the socio-economic subjugation of an individual. To strengthen my claims that immigrant novels and their subject matters are very much embedded in reality, that is, they are mimetic representations of the lived experiences of immigrants in the U.S., I rely on exploring what Ramón Saldívar in *Chicano Narratives: The Dialectics of Difference* terms as the dialectics of difference—the narrative strategy for demystifying the relations between minority cultures and the dominant culture. Using his theory of “dialectics of difference” I will demonstrate how the writers of immigrant narratives use their literary works to expose socio-economic, political and cultural marginalization and exclusion. This chapter will further explore the functions of the immigrant novel in the contemporary global context. Some of the questions that I aim to address in this chapter is what function immigrant novels have in the era of permeable borders and globalism, and whether or not these novels cater to the prevailing concept that ethnic subjects may or may not be considered universal

representations of the human experience, may or may not be of interest to audiences outside the ethnic groups, and may or may not be part of the main body of American literature.

One of the salient changes that can be traced in the literature of the new immigrants is the shift from traditional immigrant themes of one-directional assimilation into the mainstream culture, or exclusion from it. While themes in earlier immigrant literature addressed culture shock and homesickness of immigrants and their adaptation to a new home and conflicting values, literature by later immigrants often concerns recovering lost roots and ancestry. In comparison, literature depicting the experiences of more recent immigrants often examines the multiple identities of groups inhabiting cultural borderlands, and issues of racism and discrimination. Many of the new novels depicting the immigrant experience are multipolar, exploring incomplete assimilation alongside stories of the migrant's permanent return to or vacation in the native country. Of the multifarious themes, a theme that still persists in the contemporary immigrant novels is the theme of nostalgia. Although nostalgia may not be the central objective of these novels, it is part of a larger experience that unfolds the immigrants' past, their present discontentment, and their desire to build a future based on integration and stability.

Despite the fact that nostalgia is an essential experience for most immigrants, past studies on immigration have not used nostalgia as a conceptual tool to understand immigrants' experiences in a host country. Studies also have not taken into consideration American hegemonic attitudes as instigators of nostalgia. My work, by conducting a critical assessment of the literary works will add to the corpus of the research and work done on immigrant literature by relating nostalgia with the cultural, socio-economic, and political suppression of the immigrants. Due to the degree of the verisimilitude between the experiences narrated in these

texts and actual experiences of immigrants, we can learn from those fictional texts the actual experiences of immigrants and problematize the phenomena—such as the prevalence of nostalgia—linked to those experiences. Hence, by the exploration of this recurring theme, I believe I will contribute to the ongoing dialogue regarding the conception of assimilation and the identification of cultural and socio-political factors impacting the lived-experience of contemporary South-Asian and Latino immigrants in the U.S. and beyond.

Chapter One

Alienation, the Nurturing Ground for Nostalgia

Nostalgia, in different historical periods and context has been subject to harsh criticism. Opponents of nostalgia have not only criticized it by calling it a social disease (Stewart) or associating it with “elitism,” “authoritarianism,” or “idealism” (Lasch 65), but have also attacked it by accusing it of distortions and misrepresentations. Nostalgia has been seen as a debilitating form of escapism and as an inability to adapt to change and mobility. Critic Christopher Lasch condemns nostalgia avowing that it derives from emotional disability, a temperamental aversion to the rough and tumble, the complexity and turmoil of modern life (65). In a similar vein, Noël Valis scathingly asserts that, “nostalgia as a modern phenomenon, especially in the late twentieth century, often strikes us as culturally degraded or at best historically inconsequential” (119). But nostalgia, as Sean Scanlan has pointed out was not, and is not so simple; in fact, nostalgia is always complicated—complicated in what it looks like, how it works, upon whom it works, and even who works on it (“Nostalgia” 3). That’s why despite the fact that nostalgia has been rebuked by many critics and a nostalgic person has been alleged to be “worse than a reactionary” and an “incurable sentimentalist” (Lasch 65), there are others who have expressed contradictory views regarding nostalgia. Jackson Lears opposes the negative views declaring that the nostalgic person’s longing for time lost deserves to be treated as more than symptom of intellectual weakness. He claims that we need to take nostalgia seriously as an energizing impulse, and maybe even as a form of knowledge. The effort to revalue what has been lost, Lears believes, can motivate serious historical inquiry, and can also cast a powerful light on the present (66). This is indeed the objective of this chapter, where the exploration of the nostalgic tendency of the protagonists in the literary texts under analysis will offer valuable insights into their present

condition of disenfranchisement. In this chapter, I bring under my investigation *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, *The Inheritance of Loss*, and *Arranged Marriage* in order to show how these novels that deal with the immigrant experience in late twentieth and twenty-first century America engage the phenomena of nostalgia and alienation. The figures in these novels are meant to instantiate human experience, and amidst their complex narratives we see those figures engage in a particular rumination of the past that links it to their present. Their particular way of ruminating the past establishes my claim that socio-economic stagnation and political alienation in their adopted country engender nostalgia or longing for home among the protagonists.

The novelistic protagonists' particular rumination of the past, however, should not be confused with memory or reminiscence and recollection. In political theorist Steve Chilton's words, "nostalgia goes well beyond recollection and reminiscence" (qtd. in Wilson 25). Janelle L. Wilson furthers the distinction between the terms stating that while reminiscence and recollection do not involve comparison to the present or a desire to return to the past, nostalgia embodies both of these characteristics (25). The nostalgic's desire to return to the past has correlation to the present condition of life, which in comparison to the past seems unbearable and restricted. In the case of the immigrants, the challenges of adjustments in a new environment along with the hostility of the host culture that usually sees them as outcasts make them nostalgic for the past life. Nostalgia thus, for the immigrant protagonists is not a sentimentality or a colorful memory, it is rather an emotional state of mind, an agent in itself that is triggered by social and personal conditions of dissatisfaction in the present life in the adopted country. Fred Davis has rightly said that not even active reminiscence—however happy, benign, or tortured its content can "necessarily capture the subjective state we associate with nostalgic feeling" (13).

But it should also be kept in mind that nostalgia does not rise from mere longing for the past home, rather various complexities mark the nostalgic tendency. That nostalgia is not just a mourning for the lost home and time, but has other factors associated with it is very aptly pointed out by Valis, who considers that

[n]ostalgia as a particular secularized form of cultural mourning intersects, inevitably, with other manifestations of the social body, taking on the colorations of class and gender differences, local variations, and aesthetic/affective modes of expression. The perception of loss becomes the paradoxical ground for the space of nostalgia. (121)

Indeed, it is the loss—whether that loss is the loss of past home, or the loss of power and authority, or the loss of security and serenity—that becomes the nurturing ground for nostalgia. Among the various factors that contribute to the nostalgia of the immigrant protagonists, one salient factor is the host country’s unreceptive attitude towards the immigrant population. Despite being a part and parcel of American history, immigrants from the very beginning had to struggle for inclusion in the mainstream. Before delving into the analysis of the texts, it would be pertinent to get an idea of the dynamics that work behind the adopted country’s unreceptive attitude towards the immigrants.

The Dynamics at Work behind America’s Unreceptive Attitude

That immigrants are very much a part of America has been acknowledged by historian Oscar Handlin, who in *The Uprooted: The Story of the Great Migrations that Made the American People* declared that when he set out to write a history of immigration in the United States, he discovered that the “immigrants were American history” (3). But unfortunately, although the composition of American population became heterogeneous because of immigrants coming from all over the world, the mindset of Americans did not change. With the onset of

mass immigration in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the United States also contemplated establishing a nation based on homogeneity and nationality. Kathleen Neils Conzen, David A. Gerber, Ewa Morawska, George E. Pozzetta and Rudolph J. Vecoli in their article “The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the U.S.A.,” point out that “[s]ince the United States has received recurring waves of mass immigration, a persistent theme of American history has been that of the incorporation of the foreign born into the body politic and social fabric of the country” (3). However, the means of incorporation was one of assimilation and Anglo-conformity. And those who failed to dive into the melting pot were excluded from entering “into the body politic and social fabric of the country” (3). As a consequence, despite living in the United States for decades, many immigrants fail to be incorporated into the mainstream; rather, to the degree that they continue to stand out in relation to the mainstream, they are compartmentalized into different ethnic groups based on their land of origins and race. Over the past two decades scholars have charted the change of their status—“from immigrants they are said to have become ethnic Americans of one kind or another” (Conzen et al. 3). And such ethnic labels, according to scholar Suzanne Oboler “becomes a racism tool used to deny both U.S. born and migrant Latino’s full citizenship rights and political representation” (2). In her ground breaking book, *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and the Politics of (Re)Presentation in the United States*, Oboler expresses her discontent with the labels placed on various ethnic groups. According to her, “[b]y the very political and social usage, stigmatizing labels confirm the existence of a distinction in the society between full civil rights guaranteed to all and the definition of rights as social privileges extended to certain groups and denied to others” (xvii). Focusing on Latinos in the U.S., she observes that people of Latin American descent in the United States have long been perceived homogenously as “foreign” to the image

of “being American” since the nineteenth century, regardless of the time and mode of their incorporation into the United States or their subsequent status as citizens of this nation (18). Despite the presence not only of non-Anglo-Saxon and Catholic Europeans, but also of Native Americans and African Americans, as well as Asians, Caribbeans, and Latin Americans of varying classes, races, and national origins, the community of *Americans* came to be imagined as white, Protestant, and Anglo-Saxon (Oboler 19). By the twentieth century, irrespective of citizenship status, non-white-European racial minorities born in the United States continued to be perceived in the popular mind as outside of the “boundaries” of the “American” community. They are not only barred from entering the boundaries of “American” community, but are also excluded from the locus of all power.

The hegemonic group’s fear of the erosion of national sovereignty is the principal reason for fostering hostility towards the immigrant populations. Social anthropologist Arjun Appadurai in *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger*, very dexterously unravels the complex dynamics that fuel the fear of losing national purity. According to Appadurai, the very concept of modern nation-state is problematic and dangerous. In his view, no modern nation, however benign its political system and however eloquent its public voices may be about the virtues of tolerance, multiculturalism, and inclusion, is free of the idea that its national sovereignty is built on some sort of ethnic genius (3). Appadurai thinks that fear—the fear of losing national purity and the fear of morphing into minority groups—are the reasons the minority groups bear the brunt of social rage. And this “social rage” of the hegemonic group is often expressed through subjecting the members of the minority group, whether they are immigrants or ethnics, to racism and socio-economic and political marginalization. Appadurai further argues, “minorities in a globalizing world are a constant reminder of the incompleteness

of national purity” (84); hence they are perceived to be a threat, and the logic from that vantage point extends to suppressing them as much as they can be. He terms the majoritarian identities as predatory identities who require the extinction of another collectivity for their own survival. Predatory identities, in other words, are products of situations in which the idea of a national peoplehood is successfully reduced to the principle of ethnic singularity, so that the existence of even the smallest minority within the national boundaries is seen as an intolerable deficit in the purity of the national whole (53). The other fear, which according to Appadurai, prompts the hegemonic group to adopt an exclusionary attitude towards the minority group is the fear of morphing into minority groups. The psychological mechanism that works behind such political oppression and bars the minorities from coming to the center is the fear of role change, which Appadurai terms as morphing into one another. In his view, majorities can always be mobilized to think that they are in danger of becoming *minor* (culturally or numerically) and to fear that minorities, conversely, can easily become *major* (through brute accelerated reproduction or subtler legal or political means) (83). The fear of being overpowered by the minority through role change instigates the majoritarian group to be antagonistic towards the minority group. All these factors accompanied by the desire of building a homogeneous nation-state actuate the hegemonic society to adhere to its exclusionary attitude towards its minority and immigrant groups.

Arguments against heterogeneity arise from the concept of building a nation composed of people having a common culture, phenotype, and so on. But the very idea of building a nation based on homogeneity becomes disconcerting when considered from political theorist Benedict Anderson’s view of nation and nationalism. In his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Anderson offers to provide an interpretation of “the

‘anomaly’ of nationalism” (4). He interprets “nationality [...] nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind” (4), and defines nation as “an imagined political community” that is “imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6). He goes on to explain that nation is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion (6), and *limited* because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations (7). Anderson, thus claims that all communities are in fact imagined which means that communities are to “be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (6). In other words, nation, nationalism and nationality are all socially constructed. Hence, if the nation is a socially constructed community, then the shared identities or the characteristics of the members that make them part of that community are not intrinsic, that is, they are also socially invented and somehow arbitrarily designed and decided by humans. Therefore, race, ethnicity, language, cultural differences or any other differences that immigrants have should not deter them from joining the rest of the members of that community. And yet it is seen that despite living in the U.S. for generations and speaking the language of the nation, many immigrants and their descendants may still not be considered part of the American social fabric. Anderson further propounds that one could be “invited into” (145) the imaged community. But unfortunately, even after going through the naturalization process, or holding dual citizenship in the home and host country, immigrants are not “invited” or assumed to be part of the host community in the true sense. In fact, as recorded by Oboler, the boundaries of the national community of the U.S were “imagined” in white Anglo-Saxon Protestant terms. And, once “imagined” in those terms and institutionalized through segregationist law and customs, the

reality of the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, in Oboler's words, were to long affect every aspect of the daily lives of the Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and other racialized, minorities in the United States (43).

With the rise in exile, diaspora, displacement, and dislocation, the idea of homogenous nation, culture, and national identity, has undergone change. At such a point to think of a nation built on cultural absolutism and homogeneity could be detrimental to a nation. Homogeneity based on race and culture as a necessary condition of national community is too narrow and restrictive. Such essentialist versions of racial identity and nationalisms according to sociologist Paul Gilroy should be discarded in favor of a shared, though heterogeneous, culture that joins diverse communities. But regrettably, the effects of the nineteenth-century fusion of nationality and race were still strongly visible even in the 1960s, which were manifested in the particular forms of mobilization adopted in the struggle against the differentiated exclusion that long determined the lives of various groups in the United States (Oboler 43). Concurrently, in the literary field, the ordeals of the immigrant protagonists depicted in many of the novels written on immigrant experience in the U.S. give testimony to the fact that anti-immigrant perceptions—such as that immigrants stand in opposition to the nation's "essence of purity," (Hall 235) and are a threat to social cohesion and thus should not be granted membership in the "imagined community"—still prevail in the mindset of many Americans. It is, however, worth mentioning that although the literary works examined here may not be "authentic" in the sense that they are accurate historical record of immigrations and the ordeals associated with them, they certainly do contain elements of veracity. The works, are artistic expression of the authors' own experiences or of their ethnic groups' experiences. In this sense, the literary works render valuable insights

into the complexities and trauma that immigrants have to endure in the process of settling in the adopted land.

To the degree that the popular imagination accepts the notion of “national purity,” the host country makes it difficult for immigrants to be accepted into the economic, political and social structure of the country. Various injustices obstruct their integration into the mainstream. Injustice, in political philosopher Iris Marion Young’s view, operates on two social conditions—oppression, which she defines as “institutional constraint on self-development” and domination “the institutional constraint on self-determination” (37). The literary texts under analysis in this chapter depict instances where the central characters are subject to both oppression and domination. Oppression as stated by Young does not necessarily mean physical torture only; rather she goes beyond the word’s traditional usage of oppression as meaning the exercise of tyranny by a ruling group and claims that people can be oppressed when they “suffer some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacity and to express their needs, thoughts, and feelings” (40). Similarly, domination is understood as the inhibition or prevention of people from participating in determining their actions or the conditions of their actions. In Young’s opinion, all groups who live in the periphery are oppressed in terms of five injustices, which she terms as five faces of oppression. The injustices that constitute oppression are exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. As members of peripheral communities, the immigrant protagonists’ victimization by the “five faces of oppression” (42) demonstrates how oppression curb their various agencies of participation and alienate them socially, economically and politically from the center of power. Consequently, leading a life of curtailed agency and ostracization, the immigrant protagonists try to find solace in the past through nostalgic rumination. Most critics, despite the differences of opinion

regarding nostalgia, agree that a primary characteristic of nostalgic longing is the search for meaning in the past as a refuge from the inadequate present—a present where they are socially ostracized, economically stagnated, and politically repressed. Although traces of all the five injustices—exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence can be found in all the literary texts discussed in this chapter, I will explore each individual form of injustice through the lens of different texts to showcase the different injustices immigrant protagonists have to endure in their process of settling in the adopted land.

Social Alienation through Marginalization

For immigrants, the transition from their homeland to the new land is always already beset with hurdles. While the attempt to overcome the hurdles and integrate in the new social and geographical setting is quite precarious and strenuous, the process is complicated further when the new comers are relegated to the fringe of the society through marginalization.

Marginalization, as Young declares, is perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression because it is through marginalization that “a whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination” (53). A literary work that exhibits very aptly how marginalization bars the characters from integrating into society that underlie one type of immigrant experience is Dominican-American writer Julia Alvarez’s 1991 National Bestseller *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*. The novel through the depiction of various incidents of the Garcia sisters—Carla, Sandi, Sofia, and Yolanda—and their parents, Laura and Carlos Garcia manifest the psychological trauma and its consequences due to marginalization and other oppression. The novel in reverse order depicts the sisters’ brief years in the homeland, Dominican Republic, and

their forced immigration to the United States. The pain of leaving everything behind is quite agonizing, but that is intensified by the exploitive social conditions that make the Garcias' incorporation in the new land an excruciating one. In the U.S., they are no longer members of the upper class who led a lavish life, and whose every desire and wish was fulfilled instantly. Instead, they are transferred drastically from a world of adoration and abundance to a world of malice and domination. They are not only removed from their well-defined place within Dominican society to the peripheral position, but are also seen as "aliens" who have no place at all within their new country. As victims of social marginalization, the Garcias have to tolerate living with complaining neighbors who despise them for the mere fact that they are immigrants. The old woman who lived below them in their apartment becomes the mouthpiece of the racist views that many of the members of the mainstream have. She criticized their food and their lack of knowledge of English; even the spontaneity of the girls' sounded "like a herd of wild burros" (170) to her. She wanted them evicted just because their way of life did not conform to her (that is, the cultural mainstream's) way of life. In fact, her hatred is such that she doesn't hesitate to shout out spitefully "Spics! Go back to where you came from!" (171). Her relentless complaints and disparagement of the Garcia family reflect the intolerance and prejudice of the mainstream towards the immigrants.

While the old lady's arrogant behavior upholds the Garcia's marginalization and subjugation at the micro level of common people, an encounter with the police highlights their marginalization at the macro level. The nonchalant attitude of the police officers who come to inquire about the sexual predator who Carla encounters on her way to school projects the indifference of the mainstream society to the immigrants' wellbeing and security of life. The police officer's insensitive expression: "[t]here was no meanness in this face, no kindness either.

No recognition of the difficulty she was having to describe what she had seen with her tiny English vocabulary” (162), which manifests their reluctance to understand her, is a form of marginalization where the Garcias’ plea for help is totally ignored by the people in power. In addition, Carla’s inability to express herself in the language of the dominant group is also suggestive of her peripheral position in the society. Indeed, Joan M. Hoffman in her article “‘She Wants to Be Called Yolanda Now’: Identity, Language, and the Third Sister in *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*,” rightly observes that “[t]he struggle to master a second language is a constant reminder to these girls of their weakened position as strangers in a new land” (22). Moreover, the police officer’s face, which was “an adult version of the sickly white faces of the boys” who tormented Carla in school, made her realize that “this is what they would look like once they grew up” (162). The similarity of the faces is indicative of the fact that her humiliation and marginalization would not come to an end as she grows up; rather in the new country, she and the others like her (the immigrants) would continue to be ignored and oppressed in multifarious ways.

The Garcia girls’ marginalization becomes more apparent in the public space of school where they are singled out as the other and are assaulted verbally as well as physically. The continuous insults and humiliation from a gang of American boys who “pelted [her] with stones” and yelled “Go back to where you came from, you dirty spic!” (153) traumatize Carla to such extent that they haunt her for a long time: “[b]ut these faces did not fade as fast from Carla’s life. They trespassed in her dreams and in her waking moments. Sometimes when she woke in the dark, they were perched at the foot of her bed, a grim chorus of urchin faces, boys without bodies, chanting without words, ‘Go back! Go back!’” (164). These insults and humiliation may seem small incidents, but they have great psychological impact on Carla, and it is at such times

that she remembers the safe sanctuary of her lost home, a world which is “still peopled by those who loved her” (165). Even later on, when the girls were sent to well-known preparatory school so that they could mix with the “right kind of Americans” (108) that would facilitate their assimilation, their very existence were stigmatized by the American girls who thought they were linked to some evil doers: “like all third world foreign students in boarding schools, [they] were filthy rich and related to some dictator or other” hence, their privilege “smacked of evil and mystery” (108). It is because of such preconceived notion that associated the immigrants either with poverty or crimes, that they are defamed and avoided. Yolanda, in retrospect says, “we met the right kind of Americans all right, but they didn’t exactly mix with us” (108). As the Garcia girls, despite being immigrants, could afford to study in school with the “cream of the American crop,” (108) this meant that they must have linkage to some dictator or criminal. The denigration with which the Americans view the Garcia girls is a form of marginalization—one that makes them feel like “fish out of water” (108) and creates a void in them that cannot be filled either by their opportunity to study in the best schools or their success in becoming Americans. Such incidents of marginalization through harassment are not taken as serious injustice or oppression by the cultural mainstream, but they indeed are a form of oppression that go a long way in developing a sense of insecurity in the protagonists as they grow thereby contributing to their estrangement. Although the protagonists eventually overcome the traumatizing episodes of their life, their initial humiliation and isolation leave them psychologically scarred and make them nostalgic for their past life.

Like the Garcia sisters, Oscar also cannot escape the inevitability of being the victim of marginalization that ultimately leaves him socially ostracized. Oscar de León, the main character of Junot Diaz’s novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, is a “ghetto nerd” who is obsessed

with science fiction and fantasy. As a descendant of immigrants parents, Oscar struggles to define a place for himself both in New Jersey where he grows up, and in his native home of Santo Domingo, but unfortunately, in both places he is excluded and remains an outsider; from a very early age “he was parigüayo—anybody who stands outside and watches” (19-20n5). Although the narrator propounds that Oscar remains an outsider due to his nerdiness, his intelligence, and his grotesque physical appearance, it is, in fact, his bicultural identity that is predominantly responsible for his isolation. The narrator’s explanation at the footnote: “it might have been a consequences of being Antillean [...] or of living in the DR for the first couple of years of his life and then abruptly wrenchingly relocating to New Jersey” (23n6) very fittingly verify the fact that it is relocation that is mainly responsible for his social ostracism. Eschewed by all and deprived of friends, Oscar withdraws from the real world and tries to find solace in the world of imagination, science fiction and comic books. What is ironic is that even though Oscar is born in the U.S., which makes him a citizen of the country, and immerses himself in the American mass culture, he cannot escape the bigoted behavior of the cultural majority. His linkage to immigrant parents, his inclination towards books, topped by his dark complexion make him an outcast, a sort of deformed person: “[a] smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto” is “[I]ike having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest” (22n6) who is shunned by all.

His subjugation, especially by white boys, accompanies him to college. In Rutgers New Brunswick, he faces the same discrimination that he had faced before. He could neither befriend the whites because they maintained a cold distance from him, nor could he get access to the Dominican group of students because they shunned him for his lack of Dominican qualities: “the white kids looked at his black skin and his afro and treated him with inhuman cheeriness. The

kids of color, upon hearing him speak and seeing him move his body, shook their heads. You're not Dominican" (49). His bicultural identity makes him an easy target of marginalization in both the cultures. Although Oscar escapes physical abuse, he cannot avoid being the victim of humiliation and degradation. In his neighborhood and even in school, he is singled out as the Other and humiliated and stigmatized. In fact, school was a source of endless anguish, it was "equivalent of a medieval spectacle, like being put in the stocks and forced to endure the peltings and outrages of a mob of deranged half-wits" (19). Equating the school with medieval spectacle very well divulge the horror and humiliation that Oscar was subject to every single day. The continuous violation of the protagonists' self-respect and stigmatization decry their degraded and marginalized lives.

Alienation through Violence

Immigration to the new country not only destabilizes the characters' position in society by pushing them to the periphery, but also makes them victims of violence, thereby weakening their socio-economic position in the host country. Violence, the most obvious and heinous form of oppression, terrorizes and corners them in the adopted land through attacks on their person and property. Violence in Young's opinion also includes "less severe incidents of harassment, intimidation, or ridicule simply for the purpose of degrading, humiliating, or stigmatizing" (61). "Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs," one of the eleven short stories in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* illuminates the Indian immigrants' victimization through violence by the members of the host country. Although "Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs," revolves around Jayanti Ganguli, who comes to the United States to stay with her aunt Pratima and uncle Bikram for higher studies, the description of Jayanti, Pratima and Bikram's

victimization through violence brings to light how such hostility leaves immigrants like them socially alienated and economically devastated.

That Bikram and Pratima lead a life of constant fear and insecurity is manifested by Pratima's "nervous hands" (38) and "soft and uncertain" voice "as though she rarely speaks above a whisper" (39). As the story unfolds, the readers reveal that the fear and insecurity that haunt them have root in the repeated acts of violence committed against them and their property. Not only is Bikram's shop attacked several times, Pratima and Jayanti also fall prey to verbal and physical violence of the mainstream. Their victimization by the neighborhood boys who pelted them with slush and racist slurs exemplify the racial hatred that sometimes greets immigrants:

The boys bent their heads together, consulting, then the tallest one takes a step toward us and says, "Nigger." He says it softly, his upper lip curling away from his teeth. The word arcs through the empty street like a rock, an impossible word which belongs to another place and time [...] Now the others take up the word, chanting it in high singsong voices that have not broken yet, *nigger, nigger*, [...]. (50-51)

Jayanti perplexed at being called a nigger, realizes that if one is not white, one does not have the same right to lay claim to this country—the U.S. The very fact that the racial slurs come from young boys indicates that even children and adolescents without any authority have power over them. The violence committed against them by the minor members of the majority accentuate their powerlessness and helplessness in the host country. These racial insults in consort with an ostracized life make the protagonists long for their home country.

Bikram and Pratima's sufferings in the adopted land illustrates how subjection to violence and racial prejudice destroys not only their self-pride but also leaves them paralyzed economically for their entire life. Uncle Bikram came to the United States with the aspiration of

becoming the owner of an automobile empire but, because of the dominant group's tendency to reserve skilled, high-paying jobs for its own members, he ends up being "only a mechanic who had a dingy garage" and that too in an "undesirable part of the town" (44). Their economic hardship becomes obvious the moment Jayanti enters their apartment. Jayanti, who had pictured American home as—"the neat red brick house with matching flowery drapes, the huge, perfectly mowed lawn green like it had been painted, the shiny concrete driveway on which sat two shiny motorcars"—was totally taken aback by the dingy apartment that not only smelled of stale curry, but was also "crowded with faded, overstuffed sofas and rickety end tables that look like they've come from a larger place. A wadded newspaper is wedged under one of the legs of the dining table" (40). The juxtaposition of the imagined and the real pictures of an American house in Jayanti's mind indicates the disparity between the dream world and reality, and most importantly, gives testimony to the economic exploitation and subjugation that Uncle Bikram suffers in the adopted country.

Bikram's failure to attain economic stability in the U.S. is due to the repeated act of violence committed against him. His dream of success gradually ebbs away as he battles against the violence of the exploitive society. Bikram's endeavor to succeed, to climb the socio-economic ladder was brought to an abrupt halt when his shop was vandalized several times and set on fire by members of the mainstream. Bikram and Pratima become so desolate that they had to sell off Pratima's wedding jewelry to survive the financial crisis. In utter frustration, Uncle Bikram condemns the country for their economic deprivation: "[t]his damn country, like a *dain*, a witch—it pretends to give and then snatches everything back" (54). Disillusioned with the overall condition of the country, he warns Jayanti not to expect too much from the States: "[t]hings here aren't as perfect as people at home like to think. We all thought we'd become

millionaires. But it's not so easy" (43). His failure to accomplish his dreams despite his relentless effort has embittered him so much that he blatantly tells Jayanti that "Americans hate us. They're always putting us down because we're dark-skinned foreigners, *kala admi*. Blaming us for the damn economy, for taking away their jobs. You'll see it for yourself soon enough" (43).

Bikram's resentment is fueled up by exploitation and racial violence that he suffers in the U.S. The cultural mainstream's act of violence doesn't merely cripple them economically, but also perpetuates their peripheral position and subjugation by averting their admission into the center of economic power.

Alienation through Economic Exploitation

The feeling of being outcasts does not result from being socially ostracized only; it is heavily fomented by economic exploitation and hindrance to upward mobility as well. It goes without saying that immigrants have been and still are crucial to the continued expansion of the economy by virtue of their contributions to the development of the industries and infrastructure of the American society, but sadly enough, many of them do not gain complete economic freedom in the adopted country. Economic exploitation continues to be their perennial companion and in many cases, even if they try to overcome the economic hardship, members of the cultural mainstream create obstacles in their path of economic advancement

While Uncle Bikram's economic struggle underpins the covert exploitation that creates hindrance in economic mobility of the skilled and qualified by barring them entrance into the well paid and prestigious workforce, Biju, the protagonist of *The Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai, and Beli, Oscar's mother in *Oscar Wao*, lay bare the overt exploitation that takes advantage of unskilled laborers without considering their wellbeing. In the U.S., Beli maintains

three jobs to provide for her family while Lola, Oscar's sister takes care of him and herself. Even while battling cancer, Beli does not minimize her work load; rather, "[t]he cold, the backbreaking drudgery of the factories, the loneliness of Diaspora" (164) were the constant companion of Beli. In the host country, she toils for long hours to survive with two children, but no matter how much she worked, she is always in need of money because of her ill paid jobs. As a victim of the injustice of the exploitive society, Beli will never overcome the economic uncertainty because the exploitive social systems, as Young points out, function in such way that bring about a transfer of energies from one group to another to produce unequal distributions, and in the way in which social institutions enable a few to accumulate while they constrain many more (53). The low paying jobs to which she is limited become a de facto means of exploitation benefitting the hegemonic cohort of society, and the low wages that she receives in exchange for the majority of her time undermine her hopes of upward social mobility and economic security, in spite of her strenuous effort. There is no denying that Beli was poor in the Dominican Republic as well, but while the factors behind her exploitation transcend borders, they take on an added significance in the host country because the expectations for change are greater. The disillusionment that comes with the unsatisfied expectations contributes to nostalgia.

As is apparent in Beli's case, Biju's ordeal in New York charts the economic hostility and subjugation especially reserved for illegal immigrants. Biju's horrific experience in the States sheds light on how these immigrants are economically exploited for the benefit of the ruling class. Biju, one of the central characters of *The Inheritance of Loss*, comes to the United States on tourist visa and stays behind to materialize his dream of success. But ironically, he is disillusioned with the American dream as he comes face to face with the harsh reality that hard work does not warranty success in the capitalist society. He works at various restaurants, moving

from one ill-paid job to another and within the span of three years, he has juggled a number of menial jobs in various minor restaurants. In all of these places he was given a minimal wage and compelled to live in rat-infested basements or kitchens of these businesses. Sometimes, in the guise of helping them out by providing them “[f]ree housing,” (146) the employers in a Machiavellian way cut the pay to a quarter of the minimum wage, reclaim the tips for the establishment, and “drive them to work fifteen-, sixteen-, seventeen-hour donkey days” (146). In this way Biju, along with other fellow illegal immigrants, is subject to extreme exploitation, abuse, and permanent marginalization by unscrupulous employers who knowingly hire them for their own materialistic gain. The employers take advantage of the unauthorized immigrants for low-skilled and unskilled labor jobs but turn blind eyes to their needs because their business depends on their cheap labor. Hence, it is seen that despite working relentlessly for sixteen to seventeen hours, the undocumented employees can’t even buy enough clothes to keep themselves warm. When working as a delivery boy at “Freddy’s Wok,” to keep himself warm in the chilly nights of winter, Biju would

put a padding of newspapers down his shirt [...] and sometimes he [would take] the scallion pancakes and insert[ed] them below the paper. But even then this did not seem to help, and once, on his bicycle, he began to weep from the cold, and the weeping unpicked a deeper vein of grief—such a terrible groan issued from between the whimpers that he was shocked his sadness was so profound. (51)

His miserable condition has no effect on the employers; on the contrary, they ruthlessly abuse them physically and economically taking advantage of their “illegal” status. The racialized comment made by the wife of the Italian Restaurant Pinocchio’s owner reveals how the illegal immigrants are in fact wanted by the owners so that they can utilize them for their own profit: “[s]he had hoped for men from poorer parts of Europe—Bulgarians perhaps, or Czechoslovakians. At least they might have something in common with them ... but they

weren't coming in numbers great enough or they weren't coming desperate enough" (49). It is the desperation of these immigrants on which the restaurant owners capitalize to reap the maximum economic benefits for themselves. The restaurant owners as well as the system within which they work rather prefer these undocumented workers because they can have their work done at a much cheaper rate than they would have to pay for documented workers. That the entire system and the employers conspire to exploit the undocumented immigrants are not at all fictitious, but are a projection of the real scenario of the country can be traced in Lisa Lowe's delineation of the crisis that prevails the system of the country in her seminal book *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Lowe explains that since the 1950s, although the undocumented workers have provided the low-wage labor in agriculture, construction, hotels, restaurants, and domestic services, nothing has been done to ameliorate their conditions. She opines that the wages and working conditions of these jobs do not attract U.S. workers: the state policy will not legislate the improvement of labor conditions, but neither does it declare officially that the U.S. economy systematically produces jobs that only third world workers find attractive. The result is an officially disavowed and yet unofficially mandated, clandestine movement of illegal immigration, which addresses the economy's need for low-wage labor (21).

To the degree that Biju's story bears verisimilitude, the readers of *The Inheritance of Loss* become privy to the way many immigrants, but particularly the undocumented, contribute to the nation's economic infrastructure and public benefits system but are strictly prohibited from sharing in the very system that they help uphold. The employers do not take any steps to sponsor them because they know that these employees can be easily replaced by new set of illegal immigrants. So whenever there is "a green card check," or an investigation, their nonchalant advice to their employees is to "[j]ust disappear quietly" (16). As a result, they lead a life of

invisibility, avoiding any official institutions, such as health-care providers and schools, out of fear of detection, detention, and, ultimately, deportation. They are ignored or scorned in ways that approximate those reserved for the rats that dominate the kitchens and squalid basements in which they work and sometimes live. That even at moments of dire need, undocumented immigrants cannot seek medical attention for fear of detection and deportation becomes overtly obvious through Biju's injury and his verbal altercation with his employer. When Biju injures his knee while working at the Gandhi Café, he is denied his right to be taken to a doctor because his employer Harish-Harry, who despite being a fellow countryman, refuses to bear the medical expenses, and more importantly, because it would lead him to sponsor the other undocumented employees working under him. On the contrary, he is infuriated at Biju's demand of medical help and tells him that if he (Biju) is discontent with the overall situation, he can leave the place because he would be replaced instantly. The easy replaceability of the workers makes Harish-Harry shout out audaciously: "[k]now how easily I can replace you? [...] I'll snap my fingers and in one second hundreds of people will appear. *Get out of my face*" (188). Biju and the others like him do not show any resistance to such maltreatment because the hegemonic group manipulatively leads them to believe that this is the only way they can live in the U.S., the land of their dreams.

Biju and the other undocumented workers' inhibition in acting against the exploitation of the mainstream comes from the sense the hegemonic group projects to them that this is the lot of illegal immigrants; they also accept hegemonic ideology and willingly agree to that and endures ill-treatment. The hegemon, that is, the ruling group, exercises hegemony over the minority through their consent. Hegemony, in political theorist Antonio Gramsci's word, is "the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction

imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequence confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production” (12). That is, the ruling group imposes a direction on social life and the subordinates are manipulatively persuaded to take that “dominant fundamental” as natural. Biju becomes the prototype of hegemonic subjection. The hegemon makes people like him work under inhuman conditions without any protest because they are led to believe that this is the only way to initiate the materialization of the American dream. They believe that if they work hard and are sincere, they will someday be successful in America. What they, like Arthur Miller’s Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, fail to realize is that the hegemonic group will not allow them such easy transition from the have-not to the group of haves. In fact, they are to be exploited perennially because the social rules and the social process by which the results of work are appropriated operate to enact relations of power and inequality (Young 50). These relations, as asserted by Young, are produced and reproduced through a systematic process in which the energies of the have-nots are continually expended to maintain and augment the power, status, and wealth of the haves (50).

Political Alienation through Powerlessness

That nostalgia is not a sentimental weakness, but rather an emotional state of mind that has serious issues attached to it, is explicated by cultural critic Stuart Tannock, who asserts that “[n]ostalgia responds to a diversity of personal needs and political desires” (454). It can thus be said that along with various personal needs, the desire to be politically active in the host country is also a reason for arousing nostalgia in a person. This political desire does not necessarily mean participation in the political arena only, it also means to be able to exercise power in decision

making sectors that would impact the person's life. But what is projected in the novels thus far considered is that in the host country immigrant protagonists lead a largely powerless existence. Powerless groups, as voiced by Young are those who "do not regularly participate in making decisions that affect the conditions of their lives and actions," and over whom power is exercised without their exercising it (56). Mr. Garcia, Bikram, and Oscar all seem to exercise little or no power at all in their socio-economic life let alone wielding power in the political arena. If one is able to exercise power and authority at the micro level of one's social life, one can think of exercising power at the macro level of the political arena of the country. But as immigrants Mr. Garcia or Oscar, or Bikram are made incapable of doing either. In the Dominican Republic, Mr. Garcia was actively involved in the political arena; it is in fact, his involvement in an attempt to overthrow the Dominican dictator Leonidas Trujillo that forces him and his family to flee the country. But once in New York, Mr. Garcia's political desires have no outlet because of his position as an outsider. He, on the contrary, leads a life of an invisible man denied of all sorts of power and authority. In fact, he is reduced to such powerlessness that he even loses the ability to object to the indecent behavior of Mrs. Fanning let alone asserting his rights in the external world. His powerless position in personal and social life is explicated in the chapter, "Floor Show," where the Garcia family meets the Fannings for dinner. Throughout the dinner the Garcias remain tense as they can constantly feel their subordination. Mr. Garcia and his wife Laura's deference to their hosts, the Fannings, becomes obvious through their repeated looking down at the floor. Even nine-year-old Sandi Garcia realizes this power dynamic as she witnesses her father's helplessness when kissed by Mrs. Fanning. Inhibition in the development of one's capacities, lack of decision-making power in one's working life and exposure to disrespectful treatment because of status one occupies (Young 58) render Mr. Garcia powerless.

Similarly, Bikram and Oscar, in spite of possessing the necessary skills to succeed in their professional life, are rendered powerless by the hegemonic society. Despite their qualification, they fail to earn respect and exercise power because exploitation and the discriminatory attitude of the host country often make it difficult for them to do so by expelling them from useful participation in the society. In delineating the different facets of powerlessness, Young enunciates that “powerlessness [...] designates a position in the division of labor and the concomitant social position that allows persons little opportunity to develop and exercise skills” (56). Bikram’s dream of setting up an automobile business is shattered as his shop is repeatedly attacked by the powerful preventing him from developing or exercising his skills. On the other hand, Oscar’s position as a teacher does not usher in power and authority for him. The pre-college experience of alienation and suppression that Oscar constantly felt persisted even after he started teaching at his former high school. After graduation, when Oscar comes back to Paterson to teach at his former school, Don Bosco, he fails to exert the authority and power that his position bestows on him. Students laugh at him in the halls or interrupt him with silly question in the middle of lectures. His validity and authority is continuously put to test by his students who belong to the dominant group. He sees reflection of his own powerlessness in the others who are tortured by the more powerful: “Every day he watched the ‘cool’ kids torture the crap out of the fat, the ugly, the smart, the poor, the dark, the black, the unpopular, the African, the Indian, the Arab, the immigrant, the strange, the feminine, the gay—and in every one of these clashes he saw himself” (264). Moreover, his membership in the minority group precludes him from obtaining the power that all professionals demand. Young propounds that the powerless lack the authority, status, and sense of self that professionals and the capitalist class tend to have (57), but what is ironic is that Oscar and Mr. Garcia, despite being professionals, lack the authority and

power because of being members of the minority group. Their subordination in the adopted land “blocks the opportunity to exercise capacities in socially defined and recognized ways” (Young 57) and lead them to powerlessness and alienation.

Alienation Leading to Nostalgia

Such systemic oppression generates in the protagonists a feeling of loss, powerlessness, meaninglessness and estrangement from self and society. Thus, alienated from the locus of power and rejected from group membership they take refuge in nostalgia. The correlation between alienation and nostalgia has been established by many theorists who concur that the fundamental characteristics of alienation are often responsible for emanating nostalgia in a person. An alienated person is enshrouded by feelings of loneliness, sadness, and depression, and these are, in fact, the very feelings that trigger nostalgia. In a study aimed to investigate what triggers nostalgia, researchers Tim Wildschut, Constantine Sedikides, Jamie Arndt, and Clay Routledge, ascertain that negative affect (i.e. lonely, scared, sad, and depressed) was the most frequent trigger of nostalgia (“Nostalgia: Content, Triggers, Functions” 980). Their finding is quite consistent with Fred Davis who also claimed that nostalgia occurs amid fear, discontent, angst and uncertainty. The parochial views of those representing the mainstream and the social ostracism along with dissatisfaction in the host country compel the central characters of the literary narratives to be nostalgic for their past homeland.

The inhospitable atmosphere and at times, violent behavior of the adopted country make the Garcia girls feel that by relocating in the U.S., they have committed an act of crime— intruding into the land of the mainstream. This feeling of exclusion is very aptly explicated in the chapter “Trespass” through Carla’s inability to understand the meaning of the sign “No

Trespassing,” (151) which she sees on her way to school. The sign reverberates their feeling of being outsiders, as if they were the unwelcomed trespassers. “No Trespassing,” as David T. Mitchell has articulated “represents the loss of access to the institutions of authority and meaning making that matter in an American context” (173). As a consequence, the Garcia girls’ initial experience of the host country inevitably involves a desire for turning back to their homeland that leads to “whining to go home” (107) or, in Carla’s case, praying to God to take them back home on the day they celebrate their first year in America (150). Although their desperation to go home dwindles with the passage of time and the process of becoming Americans, the longing for home never disappears. While talking about nostalgia and immigrant experience, Andreea Deciu Ritivoi propounds that the difference in the present and past is responsible for arousing nostalgia. In her words, “what triggers nostalgia in the first place [...] is precisely a critical discrepancy between the present and the past” (30). The vast difference between their life on the island and their life in the United States makes Carla, Sandra, Yolanda, and Sofia nostalgic. The Garcia girls remember their stay on the land of origin as the happiest moments. The jubilant remembrances are in fact a creation of their present existence of dissatisfaction. In discussing the reasons of nostalgia, Tannock explains that the “the type of past (open or closed, stable or turbulent, simple or inspired) longed for by the nostalgic subject will depend on her present position in society, on her desires, her fears, and her aspirations” (456), that is, the present situation will condition the nostalgia of the nostalgic. Yolanda, Carla and their sisters’ nostalgic remembrances of a stable, happy times in their native land are indicative of their insecure, unhappy present. Their present mood of alienation in contrast to the past sense of participation makes the protagonists nostalgic, and thus their nostalgia tells us more about their barren present than their past as pointed by Davis: “nostalgia tells us more about present moods than about past

realities” (10). Consequently, their present dissatisfaction with life makes them go back mentally to their idyllic island time and again for solace.

Although the readers do not see Pratima brooding over the past life in her homeland, or going back to the past in nostalgic remembrances, the torrents of questions that she aims at Jayanti regarding her hometown indicates her longing for the home country. The fact that she remembers every minute detail of the surroundings of her town signifies that her memories of the past are very vivid in her, and that she must be visiting those places in nostalgic remembrance. The “hunger in her voice” (49) to know everything about her home shows how much she misses her “desh” (her country) (49). Even Jayanti who has come to the U.S. as a college student is engulfed by nostalgia for her home. The earnest yearning for “homehomehome” (55) encompasses most of her time in the U.S. The repetition of the word home without any gap symbolizes the intensity of her ardent desire for its comfort and sanctuary. But it bears repeating that if these characters were shown to have had a different life than their present life of utter isolation and anxiety, then they would not have been as tormented by nostalgia. Tannock suggests, in the face of an unstable present the nostalgic individual longs to return to a stable past: “nostalgia approaches the past as a stable source of value and meaning” (455), a past where everything was held in its ‘proper’ place. Pratima’s present unsecured and marginalized condition is the reason for her nostalgia. The sense of social belonging is very critical in a human life, and if immigrants are excluded from social membership, they feel vulnerable and seek to find a place in the past where they experienced full membership. This is the case with Pratima, who failing to find a place in the adopted country, goes back to the past in nostalgia.

As members of the “shadow class” (102) of illegal immigrants, Biju and his fellow workers live a life of isolation devoid of any kind of sympathy or company. They cannot be

friends with the fellow immigrants for long because as members of a shadow class they are constantly on the move, like “fugitive[s] on the run” (3); they either leave jobs, towns, or get deported, return home or change names and live in eternal fear of getting caught by immigration authorities. The employers or the people in power prolong their loneliness and alienation by overlooking their need for sponsorship and negating their basic human needs. Without any secured job and the company of any friend, Biju leads a desolate life. An emptiness grips Biju as he contemplates his miserable condition in life: “The emptiness Biju felt returned to him over and over, until eventually he made sure not to let friendships sink deep anymore” (102). It is at such moments of utter desolation and loneliness that, Biju drowns in nostalgia:

Lying on his basement shelf that night, he thought of his village where he had lived with his grandmother on the money his father sent each month. The village was buried in silver grasses that were taller than a man and made a sound, *shuu, shuuuu, shu shuuu*, as the wind turned them this way and that [...] When he visited his father in Kalimpong, they had sat outside in the evenings and his father reminisced: “How peaceful our village is. How good the roti tastes there!” (102-103)

At times he becomes so homesick that he can even feel and smell the air of the mountains of his home through the phone as he talks to his father: “the atmosphere of Kalimpong reached Biju all the way in New York: it swelled densely on the line and he could feel the pulse of the forest, smell the humid air, the green-black lushness” (230). Tranquility, serenity and a feeling of love and belongingness—the very things that are amiss in Biju’s present life—pervade his nostalgia. Nostalgia, according to Davis, has to do with the stark disparity between the present condition and the past: “[n]ostalgia’s special relationship to the past has to do with the relatively sharp contrast that the experience casts on present circumstances and conditions, which, compared to the past, are invariably felt to be, and often *reasoned* to be as well, more bleak, grim, wretched, ugly, deprivational, unfulfilling, frightening, and so forth” (15). Biju’s present insecure, lonely and wretched condition drives him towards a secured and idyllic past through nostalgic

rumination. Furthermore, in David Lowenthal's view mistrust of the future also fuels up nostalgia (11); misgivings about the future, uncertainty of what may happen can make one go back to the past, which is considered a safe haven. It is when Biju is enveloped by darkness and sees no rays of hope of a stable and secured future that he becomes nostalgic.

It is worth mentioning however, that in *Oscar Wao*, we do not see Oscar, Lola, or their mother Belicia Deleon being nostalgic for their native country; that is, their nostalgia is not apparent, but it can be sensed in their intense yearning to be somewhere and their dissatisfaction with the present and the place. There is a kind of restlessness in them that the narrator reports to the readers. Yunior, the narrator describes the family's restlessness as "a particularly Jersey malaise—the inextinguishable longing for elsewhere" (Diaz 77). But it is not just a New Jersey malaise, rather this is a malaise and longing that is pervasive to the immigrant experience. Both Lola and Belicia feel as if they don't belong in the U.S.; their constant longing for other places correlates with the feeling of being an outsider who always feels that she does not belong anywhere. This feeling of belonging elsewhere simultaneously indicates their discontent in the present space.

A question that might come to mind is: why does alienation give rise to nostalgia more than any other emotions or feelings in the immigrants? As a matter of fact, there is a correlation between immigrants, alienation and nostalgia. Alienation occurs when one is disempowered as subject; thus, anyone who is a victim of powerlessness would feel alienated. In the case of immigrants, this estrangement gives rise to another emotion—nostalgia—that encapsulates all the other emotions of sadness, insecurity, and ambivalence. For a native of the land, alienation may give rise to sadness or anger at being deprived of agency and power, but for an immigrant this estrangement gives rise to feeling of remorse, and a feeling that maybe if they were in their

native country they would not have to live in the periphery of power. This feeling in return makes them compare their past life with the present life, and evokes nostalgia in them. Nostalgia, “a positively toned evocation of a lived past in the context of some negative feeling toward present or impending circumstance,” (Davis 18) will afflict only those who in some way or the other are unhappy with their present life. If the immigrant protagonist were socially integrated and if his or her present life in the adopted country had been happy and fulfilling then, that person would most likely not have been afflicted by nostalgia as indicated by Christina Goulding, who asserts that when people are happy and in control, nostalgia tends to occur at low levels, whereas, when they feel sad and powerless, they experience higher levels of nostalgia and prefer objects providing short-term distraction from the present. The polarization of power, hostility, and exclusion from full participation in all strata of life make most immigrants’ existence in the adopted country incomplete; thus, despite their ardent desire to be integrated in the mainstream, the socioeconomic marginalization and alienation that the Garcia girls, Pratima, Jayanti, Bikram or Biju feel in the immigrant space engender a nostalgic feeling in them. Their feeling of nostalgia is thus conditioned by their present life of subordination. The next chapter, which centers on the other face of oppression, cultural imperialism of the mainstream, delineates how cultural subjugation and the anxiety associated with cultural assimilation heighten the alienated feeling and emanate nostalgia for the past land.

Chapter Two

Burden of Culture and Nostalgia

“I feel their *losses* pile up like dirt thrown on a box after it has been lowered into the earth. I see their future, the troublesome life ahead. They will be haunted by what they do and don’t remember. But they have spirit in them. They will invent what they need to survive.”

—*How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (223)

The above words, prophesized by Chucha, the Haitian maid in Julia Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, very aptly express the core concern of this chapter. Chucha’s prophecy—the Garcia girls inventing themselves to survive in the new land—indicates the change the girls have to bring in themselves to be accepted in their adopted country. The transplantation of the girls from one geographical space to another will not only entail cultural adjustment, but will also engender nostalgia, that is, they will be “haunted” by the memories of the old days. Memories of the island will be their perennial companion in the journey of life henceforth. When immigrants leave their country in hope of starting a new life in the United States, they do not seek accommodation only, they also strive for integration into the country’s social, political and cultural system of values. Late twentieth and twenty-first century South Asian American and Latino American literary works focusing on the immigrant experience show that no matter how sincerely they try to integrate into the social fabric of America by embracing assimilation and adjustment, they are seldom given full entrance into every aspect of the American socioeconomic, political and cultural arenas. This chapter, through extensive discussion of Sandhya and Yolanda, the two central characters in *Manhattan Music: A Novel* by

Meena Alexander and Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, respectively, will show how the immigrant protagonists reshape and reinvent themselves in accordance to the new cultural codes and conducts of the U.S. in order to integrate in the adopted land. The chapter also elucidates how one's own culture, phenotype, and language often become a burden in the process of cultural assimilation into the mainstream. But what the chapter predominantly is invested in portraying is how cultural negotiation and assimilation create anxiety in the protagonists, and the fact that despite their attempt at cultural negotiation and the reformation of their identity, they are not allowed full integration into the mainstream. They may be placed within the U.S. nation-state and workplace, but are marked as "foreign" and "outsider" culturally and linguistically and this positioning as the "Other," the "outsider," subsequently propels them to look backward to the past in nostalgic reminiscence.

Cultural theorist Stephen Jay Greenblatt's theoretical statement on culture is pertinent here in understanding how culture plays a major role in isolating those who show signs of difference from what is established as norm. Culture, in Greenblatt's words, is "[t]he ensemble of beliefs and practices" that function as a "pervasive technology of control;" it is a set of limits within which social behavior must be contained, "a repertoire of models to which individuals must conform" (225). Greenblatt further propounds that culture controls the behavior of members of a society. And, if this culture is the dominant culture of a country, its regulatory and disciplinary attitude towards the minority cultural groups intensifies. When members do not abide by what have been established as norms and standards, they are penalized, and as pointed out by Greenblatt, "the consequences for straying beyond them can be severe" (225). Although the United States claims to be a multicultural society, the real scenario is quite different from what is showcased. The beliefs, values, ways of decision-making and the overall infrastructure of

the country are not at all informed by several cultures. In fact, the dominant culture (white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant) establishes dominance over the members of other cultures by setting limits on their behavior, beliefs, and values, and penalizing them for not functioning within the parameters of the dominant culture. The disciplinary actions against those who deviate culturally, according to Greenblatt, may not be “the spectacular punishments reserved for serious offenders—exile, imprisonment in an insane asylum, penal servitude, or execution” (225-6), but are also painful in comparable ways. In Greenblatt’s words, “[t]he most effective disciplinary techniques practiced against those who stray beyond the limits of a given culture are [...] seemingly innocuous responses: condescending smile, laughter poised between the genial and the sarcastic, a small dose of indulgent pity laced with contempt, cool silence” (225-6). Condescending smile or sarcasm or silence may seem innocuous, but they have greater psychological impact on people because they operate on two levels; these “seemingly innocuous” punishments not only denigrate the victims, but also function as mechanisms of isolating them from social participation.

When immigrants come to the new land, they do not come alone; they come with their baggage of culture—their ways of life, food, customs and their language. Because of its position in power, the dominant culture penalizes the members of the minority culture when traces of difference are noticed. As characters representative of immigrants in the U.S., Yolanda and Sandhya may not be subjected to spectacular punishments within their respective narratives, but they certainly experience contempt, silence, and isolation for not operating within the boundaries chalked out by the dominant culture. Though isolation and contempt may not impact the individual’s body, they do afflict the soul. In fact, isolation, as documented by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, was one of the first requirements for setting up

the modern prison. Foucault, in delineating the birth of the modern prison, which was the result of the shift in focus from the prisoner's body to the soul, notes that in setting up the modern prison "the first principle was isolation" (236). As a disciplinary apparatus, "this operation of isolation, assembly without communication and law guaranteed by uninterrupted supervision" was aimed to "rehabilitate the criminal as a social individual" (238). Although isolation as criminal punishment in modern prison was implemented to arouse remorse in the prisoner, the very fact that it was a prime requirement of the modern prison indicates the psychological trauma associated with isolation and penalty. My intent in bringing in the concept of isolation and modern prison is to show that the alienation that the immigrant protagonists suffer in the adopted land as the result of rejection or contempt or silence, is no less destructive or agonizing than any physical punishment or injury. Isolation, which is a consequence of contempt or humiliation, entrenches a deep scar on the soul and ultimately drives Sandhya and Yolanda to nostalgia or a longing for the past home or homeland.

Sandhya Rosenblum, ensnarled in the net of nostalgia, leads her life living in the past. Through Sandhya, the central protagonist in *Manhattan Music*, the author Meena Alexander lays bare the psychological trauma that immigrants go through in their process of becoming American. Sandhya comes to the United States marrying Stephen Rosenblum, an American Jew to begin life anew, most importantly to escape from the past, but ironically, becomes further entangled in the memories of the past. Her tendency to live the past in the present makes one inquisitive about the reasons for such an existence. A microscopic view of Sandhya's life reveals that the alienation or isolation that is imposed on her due to her physical and cultural differences enkindles her nostalgia for her home and past life. In spite of living in the U.S. for several years, Sandhya leads life as a subordinate 'Other' lost on the fringes of private and public life. Her

marriage to an American and her endeavor to fully immerse herself in her new persona of Sandy Rosenblum, of which she says, “‘Rosenblum’ is what I am now, this bloom, this life, these roses” (9), neither aid in overcoming the subordination nor contribute to her integration. On the contrary, her complexion, ethnicity and cultural differences become a burden that preclude her from becoming an “American.” She feels the heavy weight of living in a country that continues to see her as an alien. Try as she might, Sandhya always feels out of place in the U.S. because she does not fit the normative ideal of an American. In various ways the culturally majoritarian group perpetuates her feeling of an outsider. Her mother-in-law Muriel’s rigid behavior, or the sign in the museum on Ellis Island, “THIS LAND IS NOT YOUR LAND” (37), which echoed the people’s hatred, intensified her feeling of alienation. Their visit to Ellis Island, prompted by the renovation of the immigrant facilities on the island, reawakens in Sandhya the feelings of displacement and exclusion. While for Stephen, Ellis Island was the gateway to “the land of opportunities” (8), for Sandhya it was a reminder of the ignominious treatment meted out to the Asian immigrants in the past. As she walks into the museum room with anti-Asian images like “‘Jap Go Home’ and the like,” along with “the flat caricatures, the Asian Exclusion Act written up in big type next to the letters THIS LAND IS NOT YOUR LAND” (37), she identifies with the pangs of displacement and realizes that such exclusionary attitudes have not changed much despite the reformation of immigration laws. Though immigrants are legally accepted as citizens, the embargo on their inclusion as true citizens into the social fabric of the country still remains. Sandhya does not face any official obstacle in gaining citizenship of the country; however, the continuum of intolerance and hatred in the popular mind make her realize that she and the others like her will continue to be contested and challenged by the majority.

The repressed as well as open forms of loathing exhibited by the cultural mainstream traumatize Sandhya to such an extent that she is intimidated even to walk freely in the streets of Manhattan. Her sense of marginality is marked by her fear of public assault. Her dark complexion and foreign accent and the difference in her attire make Sandhya and her cousin, Sakhi, easy prey to racial slurs and verbal violence. While in search of Indian shops and spices, Sandhya along with her cousins Jay and Sakhi becomes the target of verbal and physical assault by some teenagers representing the cultural majority. Sakhi's sari—a traditional South Asian female garment—gives the teenagers an opportunity to see her and her cousins as the Other and give vent to their contempt by throwing stones and yelling out “Paki” and then “Hindu,” one after another (135). The mental trauma, the humiliation and the shock at having stones thrown at them had an immeasurable effect on Sandhya and Sakhi. Their “moral shock” (135) at being stoned surpassed their physical pain. Physical pain passes more readily than does the mental agony and shock of the realization that the people of their adopted land resent their presence and foster so much hatred against them that they don't hesitate to exhibit their contempt by flinging stones at them. In fact, while discussing Alexander's treatment of dislocation and violence against South Asians in the United States, Stella Oh in her article “Violence and Belonging: The ‘Fault Lines’ of Language and Identity” points out the inherent meaning of such violence. In her words: “Racist remarks and violence are public exhibitions of social dominance that display who is accepted into the space of American society” (28). Hence, the stoning incident along with the harsh realization that they are unwanted in the land they consider theirs too keep returning and haunting Saki and Sandhya. Such antagonisms make Sandhya introspective and lead her to wish people could change their color and appearance when crossing borders. She pensively wonders why the transition from one place and culture to the other couldn't be as easy as the immigrant

officer who issued her green card had made it sound. The immigrant officer's welcome, "[w]elcome to America. Be happy here," and her husband Stephen's assurance that "[t]he gates of America are open wide, [...] We'll live here, Sandy, we'll be happy, I promise you" (7) prove false as she dejectedly realizes that neither those reassuring words nor the green card legitimizing her stay and her rights to U.S. citizenship guarantee her total acceptance. On the contrary, actions of hatred and rejection curb her freedom and pave the path to alienation.

Sandhya's married life, which apparently seems to be a happy one, is a mirror projection of her alienation in the U.S. Her emotional detachment from her husband echoes her "sense of lostness" (37) and disconnectedness from her new homeland. The change in their location—from Nainatal, India to Manhattan—has disrupted their emotional attachment. In the U.S. they have drifted so far away from each other that Sandhya can't "even speak openly with him" (38) anymore. Their cultural differences augmented by the racial view of the people around them have impinged on Sandhya and Stephen's conjugal life and have created a gap between them. Sandhya, aware of the differences, sulkily wonders if changing the color of her hair and complexion would help rejuvenate the relationship. She sarcastically contemplates, "What if she could peel off her brown skin, dye her hair blonde, turn her body into a pale Caucasian thing, would it work better with Stephen?" (7). She feels that her Indianness annihilates all of her attempts at inclusion and, hence, wishes for a magical transformation that would turn her into someone who would be acceptable not only to her husband but also to mainstream society. Nevertheless, despite Sandhya's attempt to assimilate into the bustling life around her, she remains an immigrant woman of color for whom "nothing felt right" (7).

In a similar vein, from the moment Yolanda and her family in *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* set foot on the new land, they are welcomed by a wave of humiliation and

hostility. In New York, the Garcia girls learn to live amid an intolerant culture that scorns their dark skin, their language and their Hispanic heritage. Besides socioeconomic and political subjugation, the Garcia family also encounters cultural imperialism. Cultural imperialism, in Iris Young's words, "involves the universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture and its establishment as the norm" (59). Exhibiting the normality of its own cultural expressions and identity, the dominant group characterizes and constructs the differences that subordinate groups exhibit as lack and negation. These groups then become marked as Other and are stereotyped and inferiorized for their cultural differences. As members of the 'Other,' the Garcia girls are inferiorized and denigrated for their cultural differences—they are ridiculed for their way of living, their food and also for their way of speaking. The white gaze makes their cultural baggage seem detestable and infuses in them such low self-esteem that they begin to feel ashamed not only of their own culture, but also of their parents who according to Yolanda still reeked of Dominicanness: "[m]y own old world parents were still an embarrassment at parents' weekend, my father with his thick mustache and three-piece suit and fedora hat, my mother in one of her outfits she bought especially to visit us at school, everything overly matched, patent leather purse and pumps" (98). Embarrassed of their immigrant parents who "would only bring [them] more ridicule" (155), the girls long for American "youthful parents" (98).

At every step Yolanda is reminded of her difference and her marginal subjectivity, whether it is by the false smile of the professor or by the arrogant attitude of the parents of her first date, Rudy Elmenhurst. The real reason behind the professor's smile—to show that the natives are friendly to "foreign students," (88)—made Yolanda aware of her differences and she felt "profoundly out of place" (89). Again, when Rudy's parents come to know of their son's relationship with Yolanda, they don't see her as an individual but as an opportunity that would

help enhance their son's knowledge of geography and other cultures. Their debilitating utterance that it "should be interesting for him to find out about people from other cultures" made Yolanda feel "like a geography lesson for their son" (98). Such obnoxious attitudes of the cultural majority which looks down upon those who are different generate self-doubt and dissonance in Yolanda and instill in her the desire to be an American instead of a Dominican:

I cursed my immigrant origins. If only I too had been born in Connecticut or Virginia, I too would understand the jokes everyone was making on the last two digits of the year, 1969; I too would be having sex and smoking dope; I too would have suntanned parents who took me skiing in Colorado over Christmas break, and I would say things like "no shit," without feeling like I was imitating someone else. (94-95)

Yolanda's words mirror and inform the Garcia sisters' distress about being immigrants and the pressure of being different in a culture that allows very little tolerance for the culturally different. Under such circumstances, Yolanda and her sisters feel the compulsion to avoid their cultural belongings and assimilate into the U.S. mainstream culture.

Negotiation of Cultural Codes as a Means of Acceptance

The culturally dominated undergo a paradoxical oppression in that they are both marked by stereotypes and at the same time rendered invisible (Young 59-60). And to come out of marginality and invisibility, these cultural minorities either succumb to change or step into the process of negotiating their cultural identities. But this negotiation of cultural identity should not be thought of as being forcibly imposed upon them; rather the complex process of their negotiation can be explained by Mary Louise Pratt's "contact zone" theory. Pratt refers to the contact zone as a place where two cultures contact and inform each other, and "transculturation" takes place. In her book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Pratt defines the "contact zone" as "the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come

into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (6). In the clash of cultures, where various social aspects, tradition, and values are exchanged between the cultures that come in contact with each other, it is usually the culture with lesser power that undergoes the majority of the changes. Pratt’s *contact zone* is thus, a highly contested political, linguistic, and cultural site where struggle occurs and power is negotiated. The contact and conflict between cultures of asymmetrical power result in the capitulation of the less powerful culture whereby the subordinate culture adopts the traits and the value system of the powerful culture. Thus, the political, cultural and ideological views of the subordinate to a great extent are shaped by the superordinate group. She further writes that a “contact” perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. Pratt’s contact zone theory exemplifies how the U.S. as a contact zone becomes a space where immigrants from different geographical spaces confront and interact with the dominant white group in an unbalanced power relation. The power differential at play in the cultural encounters between the divergent immigrant groups—Sandhya as representative of South Asian immigrants and Yolanda of Latino immigrants—and their white American counterparts transforms the immigrant protagonists into subjects aspiring to become Americans. Hence, both Sandhya and Yolanda and her sisters become their own agents of radical change in order to integrate themselves into the social fabric of the country they call home now.

As residents of the contact zone, immigrant protagonists constantly negotiate and renegotiate the cultural codes, customs, and social mores to gain acceptance in the new land. Salman Rushdie has very aptly articulated the multiple levels of negotiation that immigrants have to undergo in order to construct an identity. Rushdie, in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and*

Criticism, asserts that immigrants have to suffer multiple disruptions or changes before they can define themselves as being human. In his words:

A full migrant suffers, traditionally, a triple disruption: he loses his place, he enters into an alien language and he feels himself surrounded by beings whose social behavior and codes are very unlike, and sometimes even offensive, to his own. And this is what makes migrants such important figures: because roots, language and social norms have been three of the most important parts of the definition of what is to be a human being. The migrant, denied all three, is obliged to find new ways of describing himself, new ways of being human. (277-278)

Denied roots, language, and social norms, the three most important aspects of being a human being, the fictional immigrant protagonists in South Asian and Latino literature, like their real-life counterparts, have to redefine themselves from a different angle. They renegotiate their way of life, their views and ideologies and most importantly their language in accordance to the cultural context of the new land.

To overcome the alienating attitudes of the mainstream, Sandhya tried her best to integrate into the U. S. culture. Her efforts to belong to the new space become clear in her conversation with Draupadi, Sandhya's alter ego, where she informs Draupadi how ardently she had wanted to belong to the new country. She says, "I used to sit on a bench in Central Park wondering what it would be like to belong here. Dying to belong" (200). The ineffectiveness of her sincere efforts to integrate had made her desolately wish for a magic spell that would transform her into a person who would physically and culturally instantaneously fit into the preshaped mold of an American. Her philosophical and cynical musings: "[s]upposing she were to swallow the green card, ingest that plastic, would it pour through her flesh, a curious alchemy that would make her all right in the new world?" (7) simultaneously express her poignancy and the vehemence to belong to the country. Although Stephen and his mother indicate that they have paved the way for immigrants so that Sandhya and the others like her could have a smooth

transition into the social fabric of the new land, she realizes that her own process of accommodation cannot be identical to theirs but must be put together from her own experiences, characteristics, and desires. After her failed attempt at suicide and her encounter with the other South Asian women immigrants, Sandhya's personal agency to change gains momentum and she perceives that to achieve full integration into the new cultural environment she has to reconstruct herself in a new light, that is, following Stephen's advice she has to take "America head on" (39). She decides no longer to lead the life of an outsider and resolves not to hover between two cultures anymore, but instead, have strong footing in America, very firmly uttering, as if "she were making an oath": "I do not want to be suspended in midair. No more, hung up, swaying [...] I shall stay close to the ground" (223). Sandhya's resolution uttered in an oath-like manner indicates the sincerity and earnestness of her decision to be part of the country.

Sandhya's negotiation and recreation of the self is conveyed through the titles of the chapters as well. The gradual changes she undergoes in her process of accommodating the cultural traits of the adopted land are symbolically expressed through the titles of the chapters that revolve around her narrative. The titles "Sitting," "Stirring," "Going," "Stoning," "Turning," and finally "Staying," manifest the various stages of her transformation. The continuous form of the verbs indicate that the action of accommodation is still going on, that is, the process of recreating herself is still going on. The novel opens and ends with Sandhya sitting on the bench at Central Park, but while the first chapter "Sitting" shows an anxious Sandhya pondering over her traumatic existence as an outsider both in private and public life and struggling to accommodate to her surroundings, the last chapter reveals her as a transformed person who has gained profound insight into the overall situation and as the title "Staying" indicates, she is resolute and determined to initiate further changes that are required to stay in America. The

novel beginning and ending at the same place symbolizes her circle of experience that brought forth the change in her. Hence, each of the above-mentioned chapter titles is actually the manifestation of Sandhya's psychological process of coming to terms with her new space and finally her decision to reinvent herself to claim her place in the U.S.

As representatives of the Latino immigrant experience in the U.S., the Garcia girls also showcase the transformation that is required to be considered Americans. Despite their parents' strictness, the Garcia girls constantly reconstruct their identity whether in private schools, college, marriage, divorce, or sexual relationships, and succumb to the demands of the dominant culture. Cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity is particularly relevant in understanding the type of transformation the Garcia girls represent. In his canonical essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Hall asserts that people of diaspora are "constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (235). Although at the center of Hall's discussion lies diaspora identities and representation, his views regarding culture, displaced identity and its subjection to change are applicable to immigrant identity as well. Hall does not view cultural identity as something discrete and bounded that can be foisted on someone; rather, he believes that instead of thinking of culture in essential terms, it should be thought of as an ongoing process. He posits that "cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. It is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return" (226). Hall further considers that although cultural identity can be interpreted as "the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes

of our actual history” (223), it is also a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being,’ which is to say that:

It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. (225)

In Hall’s view, then, identity is socially and culturally constructed and is essentially subject to the differences of time and place. The fluidity of identity makes the Garcia girls more susceptible to change under the influence of “history, culture and power” (225) in the contact zone. The Dominican cultural identity that the girls come with to the U.S. undergoes a drastic change when it comes under the “play” of powerful American culture in the contact zone.

As agents of their own transformation, Yolanda and her sisters divorce themselves from their native cultural mores and beliefs and make every attempt to “to fit in America among the Americans” (138). In their endeavor to become Americans, they adopt all the traits of American culture. Defying the Dominican patriarchal authority, the girls learn to exercise their individuality and independence—arguably two intrinsic American characteristics—and within a few years the girls had “*more* than adjusted” (109) to the American lifestyle; as Yolanda says, “my sisters and I had been pretty well Americanized since our arrival in this country a decade before” (87). The reformulation of their cultural identity is thus the outcome of residing in the “contact zone” where “cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone” 34). These interactions and altercations, characterized by the imbalance of power between the cultures, lead Yolanda and her sisters to identity negotiation and renegotiation. As members of the less powerful group, the Garcia girls realize that acquiring certain aspect of the hegemonic cultural

practice paves the path to acceptability and consequently negotiate their cultural identity by adopting the values, mores, perceptions and the language of the dominant culture.

Along with cultural assimilation the immigrant protagonists also yield to linguistic assimilation. Inability to communicate using the dominant language—English—is seen by many as a stumbling block in the path of integration into the new culture. Although there is no federal or national law that forces the immigrants to learn English, the acquisition of the language of the majority is seen as a normative means of integration and of upward social and economic mobility. When Sandhya and Yolanda first come to the United States, they are not only teased for their language, but are also ostracized for their lack of knowledge of English. At the initial stage of their relocation, the Garcias are pelted with racial slurs and crude terms for their inability to speak the language. Because of her accented speech, Yolanda retreats to the realm of silence to save herself from being the object of her “classmates’ ridicule” (Alvarez 141). Carla’s struggle with English not only turns her into an object of humiliation when the bullies in her school mimicked her accent and taunted her for her mispronounced words, but also nullifies her existence as a human to the police officers who came to investigate the sexual predator, and her right to obtain justice. Language thus functions simultaneously as a means of silencing the immigrant protagonists as well as a mechanism of exercising power over them. Correspondingly, Sandhya’s effort of coping with her surroundings is complicated further by her inability to express herself eloquently in the dominant language. Although she tries her best, “[n]either gestures nor words came out right” (Alexander 7) for her. Her inability to express herself often led her to feel jealous of her husband, Stephen, whose knowledge and usage of American English made him “whole” (Alexander 69). Sandhya feels that it is her incompetence in the use of the English language along with her accent that dismisses her from achieving the sense of

intactness and wholeness: “Stephen’s American English [...] accents [...] signal[ed] an intactness she felt she could never aspire to, his language undeterred by border crossings into other, fraught territories” (69). Her struggle with the dominant language, which acts as a determinant factor of inclusion, not only deters her from having anchorage in the new land, but bars her from having a sense of cohesion.

This realization that the knowledge of the dominant language is instrumental in crossing the cultural inequalities propels the protagonists to master English. As Pratt has argued, although the disparity of power precludes the subordinate people from having control over “what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what gets absorbed into their own and what it gets used for” (“Arts” 36). In choosing what to assimilate and what to reject, subordinate people exercise a degree of agency in determining their social roles in the face of marginalization. The immigrant protagonists are aware that one way of overcoming the stigma of marginality is to master the hegemonic language. Hence language becomes a major factor which they select and appropriate to ensure socioeconomic mobility. Yolanda realizes that not to be able to speak English is to be invisible, and the only way to reverse that invisibility is to be assertive, to have a voice, and that can only be achieved when the dominant language is learnt. Yolanda henceforth becomes adamant in mastering the language. She decides to claim her voice and create a place for herself by evolving as a writer. Through the immaculate use of the English language she transforms her lack into power, a mechanism of integrating into the mainstream. She seeks to combat the unfriendly and inhospitable country by being equipped with the mastery of the language: “[b]ut in New York, she needed to settle somewhere, and since the natives were unfriendly, and the country inhospitable, she took root in the language” (141). By high school,

she had become so adroit in the language that the nuns were reading her stories and compositions out loud in English class.

Losing the accent of one's own language and achieving eloquence in the English language is thus seen as a means of integration. That is why not only the Garcia girls, but also their parents make every effort to rid the girls of their accent. Even Carlos Garcia, who was a staunch adherent of his Hispanic heritage, "paid to [...] smooth the accents out of their English in expensive schools" (36) realizing that to be accepted his girls must lose their accents without losing too much of their cultural heritage. Joan M. Hoffman in her article "'She Wants to Be Called Yolanda Now': Identity, Language, and the Third Sister in *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*" states that language is a powerful symbol of the four girls' successful bicultural assimilation into the American way of life:

While accentuating youthful vulnerabilities, the struggle with language in the novel also highlights the need to find the strength and self-assurance to forge an assimilated dual identity on the journey to a self-determined adulthood, an identity that both melds and celebrates cultural and linguistic elements from the Old World and New. (22)

The protagonists realize that in order to find strength and self-assurance and to forge an identity in the adopted land, they need to rebuild an identity that celebrates cultural and linguistic elements of both the countries of origin and adoption. Their linguistic assimilation, which is also an assimilation of the self as pointed out by Gloria Anzaldúa "ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language" (59), is undeniably a major part of their desire and endeavor to be accepted in the adopted land.

Ethnic Anxiety as a Result of Transculturation

But the transformation that the protagonists go through, or their assimilation into the new culture and language is not without conflict; rather, it is very much wrought with fear and anxiety. The process of transition termed as transculturation by Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz in his book *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* encapsulates the different stages of transformation that subordinate or marginal groups undergo when they come in contact with dominant culture. Ortiz defines the term as:

transculturation better expresses the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another because this does not consist merely in acquiring another culture, which is what the English word *acculturation* really implies, but the process also necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture, which could be defined as a deculturation. In addition it carries the idea of the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena, which could be called neoculturation. (102-3)

Ortiz's explanation of transculturation with its three phases of acculturation, deculturation, and neoculturation explicate the intricacy of transformation recognizable in the immigrant protagonists as they acclimatize to the new culture. Ortiz also expresses that transculturation is driven by powerful forces at the macrosocial level. This process of incorporation into the new cultural space, which requires deculturation, that involves sacrificing or losing the traits of one's own culture, engenders in one a unique kind of fear, the fear of losing one's own distinct entity and of homogenization. Similarly, Michael M. J Fischer in "Ethnicity and the Postmodern Arts of Memory" explains the ethnic anxiety that all immigrants and other minority members feel under the pressure to homogenize. In Fischer's words, ethnic anxiety is the fear of being homogenized into minority groups and this fear is not "merely of being leveled into identical industrial hominids" it is also the "fear of losing an ethical (celestial) vision that might serve to renew the self and ethnic group as well as contribute to a richer, powerfully dynamic pluralist

society” (197). Arguably then, the anxiety of losing one’s own language and culture is always at the back of immigrants’ mind and this fear is manifested in their attempt to hold on to some of their cultural traits. To resist the threatening homogenization of the Anglo culture, the immigrant characters resist total assimilation. In *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, though Carlos Garcia sends his daughters to the best American school in order to improve their fluency in the language of the dominant group, he himself does not learn the language. Moreover, whenever he fears the girls are becoming too Americanized, to retain their own cultural identity, “to help set [them] straight” (109) he sends the girls to the Island during the summer for cultural reinforcement.

Complexities and ambivalence also mark Yolanda and her sisters’ turbulent transition. All of the four sisters, Carla, Sandi, Yolanda and Fifi, simultaneously resist and comply with the mainstream. As the sisters grow, they face a unique problem as immigrants; in every choice they are placed in a complex cultural tug-of-war, which is complicated further by their father’s decision of sending them back to the island so that they don’t lose touch with their own culture and traditions. Yolanda reports,

We began to develop a taste for the American teenage good life, [...] By the end of a couple of years away from home, we had *more* than adjusted.

And of course, as soon as we had, Mami and Papi got all worried they were going to lose their girls to America [...] The next decision was obvious: we four girls would be sent summers to the Island so we wouldn’t lose touch with *la familia*. (emphasis in the original 108-109)

In their attempt to straddle two disparate cultures, the sisters remain in a mid-position where they belong to neither of the cultures. They keep oscillating between two cultures and suffer subsequent alienation from both their adopted country and their native homeland. In Anzaldúa’s view such “voluntary (yet forced) alienation makes for psychological conflict, a kind of dual

identity” (63) that leads *mestizos/as* like her to identify with neither the Anglo-American cultural values and nor with their native culture. In her words:

This voluntary (yet forced) alienation makes for psychological conflict, a kind of dual identity—we don’t identify with the Anglo-American cultural values and we don’t totally identify with the Mexican cultural values. We are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness or Angloness [...] I feel like one cancels the other and we are zero, nothing, no one. (63)

As immigrants, the Garcia girls go through a similar crisis as they try to strike a balance between the different cultural systems of Dominicaness and Angloness, but consequently experience alienation or rejection from both cultures and remain “no one” in both cultures. The cultural clashes and ambivalences push all the four Garcia girls into perfectionism, mental illness, and divorce. Their dissonance in life foregrounds the deep psychological problems that are manifested by Yolanda and Sandra’s nervous breakdowns. Anzaldúa’s explanation of the ambivalence that people living on the borderline of two cultures suffer clearly explains the dissonance and psychological conflict that they suffer. Anzaldúa claims that “[t]he ambivalence from the clash of voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity. Internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness. The *mestiza*’s dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness” (234). Because of her ambivalent feeling, Yolanda ends up in the hospital unable to understand the language she had so fiercely mastered, “[t]hey were clean, bright sounds, but they meant nothing to her” (Alvarez 77). Her psychological turmoil informs the tension between assimilating into U.S. customs and at the same time contesting those very customs.

The depictions of ethnic anxiety and the navigation of the contact zone are reinforced in Meena Alexander’s work as well. In *Manhattan Music*, Sandhya’s transculturation, which compels her to embrace new values and norms while abjuring her own cultural mores, generates

in her anxiety about her overall position in the new country. No matter how much she tries to forge an assimilated dual identity, her feeling of unbelongingness and exclusion makes her feel like “an unborn thing” a puppet with no play to be in (9). Her every attempt of “belonging” is systematically undercut by the hegemonic culture. A desperate loneliness and isolation enshrouds Sandhya through most of the novel. She feels like “a creature of restless passage” (13) very much like Anzaldúa’s *mestiza* who is “a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another,” and as a *mestiza* her dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness (78). Anzaldúa further propounds that a *mestiza* “undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war” (78) and it is precisely this struggle that Sandhya goes through being placed at the borderline of two cultures. She cannot come to terms with the duality generated by the experience of crossing borders and fears “she might die of the sheer transparency needed to be in two places at once” (95, 96). Sandhya’s brief clandestine affair with the Egyptian immigrant Rashid el Obeid is, to some extent, a search for stability. Unlike Stephen, Rashid is an outsider like her and their commonality as displaced people binds them together: “[b]oth he and Sandhya were foreigners in America, they would cradle each other. He would cast her afloat on the Nile and with her, he would sail on the Ganges” (76). They can share their nostalgic past, and relate to their unstable identity. But with Stephen she can share none of these; they are poles apart. Rashid, on the other hand, as a co-sufferer shares Sandhya’s pangs of homelessness, and they subsequently try to find solace and comfort in each other. In Lavina Dhingra Shankar’s words, their relationship “exposes the tribulations of homeless, rootless people, desperate to feel at home, trying to provide each other with security in an alien space” (295-6). This relationship, however, does not last long, as Rashid refuses to give permanence to their relationship and Sandhya attempts to commit suicide. But the failed

relationship is not the sole reason behind her suicide attempt; in fact, it is predominantly her immigrant anxiety, coupled with her father's death, and Rashid's rejection that leads her to a nervous breakdown and a suicide attempt.

Hence, transculturation, a distinct phenomenon of the contact zone, whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture ("Arts of the Contact Zone" 36), is neither a linear process whereby immigrants come and assimilate without any psychological trauma, nor is it a simplistic transition from one culture to another that happens automatically or immediately once immigrants enter the country. Rather, the crossing of borders is rife with hurdles and turmoil that affect immigrants physically and psychologically, as Sandhya says, "[t]he borders she had crossed had marked her very soul. Now she was a tattooed thing" (74). And even if by overcoming the hurdles and dilemma Sandhya and Yolanda do try to assimilate and cope as new *mestizas* "by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity [...] learn to juggle cultures [...] have a plural personality, [...] nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing ejected, nothing abandoned" (Anzaldúa 79), they are neither accepted in their own culture nor are they able to gain full inclusion into the American culture. Regardless of their efforts to accommodate the changes, they remain in the liminal space of both cultures. In discussing the notions of liminality, marginality, and outsiderhood, cultural anthropologist Victor Turner has pointed out that the immigrant is usually marginal, someone who walks within more than one culture but who will never fully enter into a status position within the dominant social structure. As immigrants, Sandhya and Yolanda, will always remain at the threshold of the dominant culture; their transformation will not sanction them entrance into the central space of their adopted country.

Ethnic Anxiety Generates Nostalgia

The condition of living in the borderline of two cultures and having no strong standpoint in either of the cultures leaves Sandhya and Yolanda discontented with their present life and propels them to nostalgia. The cultural differences that are repeatedly pointed out by the cultural majority exacerbate Sandhya's feelings of rootlessness and homelessness. However hard she tries to "cope with dislocation" (42) and to belong to the new space by embracing cultural appropriation, she feels distant from her surroundings and even from her husband; it is as if she is "locked [...] into a world she [...] had not chosen" (38). A feeling of "emptiness," "a gnawing hunger, a desperation" (42) enshrouds her as she realizes how alienated she is from everything and everyone and this position as an outsider incubates her nostalgia. That Sandhya leads a life ensnared in the net of nostalgia becomes explicit at the very onset of the novel where Sandhya is seen sitting on a bench in Central Park lost in nostalgic remembrance of herself at age six, in her grandmother's courtyard in Kerala, India, watching a puppet-show about the mythic Draupadi's¹ exile. The scene of Draupadi's exile very pertinently delineates Sandhya's exilic condition in the U.S.; she equates her feeling of homelessness in the U.S. to Draupadi's years of exile: "Words Sandhya could no longer summon up about exile, about being unhoused, and the long years Draupadi waited" (6). The very word "unhoused" resonates with Homi Bhabha's key term "unhomed" (141) in the article "The World and the Home." Bhabha uses Freud's concept of the uncanny to describe the sense of belongingness and the sense of "home." In Bhabha's view "unhomed" does not mean being homeless, rather "unhomely" is the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world in an unhallowed place. Hence, the state of the "unhomely"

¹ Draupadi is a character in the Hindu epic, *Mahabharata*, who accompanied her five husbands into exile at a forest for 12 years.

is not a state of lacking a home, or the opposite of having a home; it is as explained by Bhabha, “the uncanny literary and social effect of enforced social accommodation, or historical migrations and cultural relocation” (141). Sandhya’s unhomed or unhoused feeling creeps into her as she realizes her vulnerable position in the adopted land. Bhabha further argues, “The unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence” (144). Her subordinate existence at home as well as in the broader social and political arena of the adopted land become the fertile ground for breeding Sandhya’s nostalgia.

Sandhya literally relives her life in India in her present time in the U.S. Her nostalgia dominates her so much so that every mundane task or incident or even a simple neon sign conjures up the restless feeling of a “nomad,” (13) a displaced person; she would either be remembering her time spent with her boyfriend Gautam, or her cousin, Chandu, or her mother. Even when walking down the streets of Manhattan, she would imagine her mother walking in the rain with the maid following behind her (55). She is engulfed in memories of her life in India: “memory swelling like black water threatened to drown her” (4). In order to keep her sanity, every summer, with “bag and baggage” (42) Sandhya returned home to India in reality as well as in nostalgia, “[t]o keep things on even keel, she kept returning to her childhood home, a house with a red-tiled roof and a sandy courtyard where the mulberry bloomed” (41). Sandhya’s nostalgic remembrance of her home in Tiruvella exposes her deep seated desire to belong to a place. Janelle L. Wilson in *Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning* explains that people “nostalagize” for those things which symbolize what they wish for (26); that is, what they are nostalgic of reveals what they value and deem worthwhile and important. In Sandhya’s case, it is home along with its people that predominates her nostalgia. Home is not just a dwelling place but is

associated with one's roots and childhood. Psychologist Willis H. McCann does not view home only as a place where people live, rather he redefines the meaning of home from a different angle. In his Ph.D. dissertation "Nostalgia: A Descriptive and Comparative Study" McCann defines home as something that "may mean the people of the neighborhood, community, town, state or country [...] Home may mean one's close friends, or one's neighbors [...] Home may mean the way in which things were done, the characteristic patterns of behavior, the customs, the attitude, the beliefs, and the mode of living" (143-45). Sandhya's longing for home encapsulates her desire not only to be amid the security and stability of home, but also the familiarity and acceptance of people and culture and customs. Security, stability and acceptance, which are amiss in her present life, make her childhood home valuable to Sandhya and thus she keeps searching for them in the past. McCann further points out that people can be homesick even when home life was hard and cruel, and when characterized by hardships and poverty. Sandhya's nostalgic reminiscence of the past is not always of happy moments, but nevertheless, she wanders back to those times when she had a sense of identity and belongingness, which are entirely missing in her present life. This argument that nostalgic people go back to the past in search of the things that are missing in their present life is repeatedly underscored by Stuart Tannock who remarks that "the ever-present danger in locating sources of community, identity, and agency in the past, as nostalgia does, lies in the underlying suggestion that such sources are not available in the present" (458).

In the U. S., Sandhya's life is one of alienation both in private and public life. In fact, she suffers triple alienation—she is alienated from her husband, alienated from her native country, and alienated from her adopted country. Contrary to her expectations, her life in America turns out to be empty and isolated. Being engulfed in utter estrangement, Sandhya looks for sustenance

through nostalgia. Her constant move between present and the past is the result of the denial of acceptance in the new space. She had never felt entirely complete or whole in the adopted country like the way Stephen felt. Her desire for a coherent and consistent identity pulls her back to the past. Sandhya's nostalgia acts as a "defense mechanism designed to maintain a stable identity" (Ritivoi 9) for her because it provides her with solace as well as sustenance. The past gives her the strength to sustain amid hostility and loneliness, and at the same time, nostalgia channelizes in her the strength to accept the change and adjustment required to survive in the adopted country. She is like the monster in *Frankenstein* that Rashid had talked about. While delineating the condition of immigrants, Rashid tells Sandhya that "[i]mmigrants are like that [the monster]. Our spiritual flesh scooped up from here and there. All our memories are sizzling. But we need another. Another for the electricity. So we can live" (154). His description clearly indicates how for immigrants like him, memory and nostalgia become an energizing source that propel them to move on. Just as the monster needed electricity to live, in the same way, as an immigrant, Sandhya needed memory to sustain her. Through her nostalgic return to her past life, times of her childhood, her home, and time spent with her mother, and Gautam, she gets the strength to survive amid hostility and indifference.

Similarly, Yolanda and her sisters attempt to hold a strong grip on themselves and their dislodged identity through nostalgic reminiscence. Their fractured identity and the discontinuities have direct connection to nostalgia. Nostalgia, as Tannock propounds, is a response to the experience of real and abrupt discontinuities (459). Despite their utmost attempt to adjust and belong to the adopted country, they feel a vacuum; Yolanda feels like an alien who cannot connect even to her husband, and this feeling of alienation prompts her to be nostalgic about the past. That their tendency of going back to the past through nostalgia is an attempt to

find meaning of their present condition has been pointed out by David T. Mitchell, who in his article “The Accent of ‘Loss’: Cultural Crossings as Context in Julia Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*,” writes,

like Yolanda’s craving for guavas, the native fruit she ate as a young girl, all the characters in the fiction attempt to reclaim the present in terms of the past—their experiences in the United States compared and contrasted to their lives before the family’s exile. The imaged or imagined homeland that haunts each narrator serves as a barometer to gauge the “success” or “trauma” of the years that follow. (170)

The sisters’ failures—Carla’s inability to express herself clearly to the policeman after being sexually accosted, Yolanda’s failure to communicate with her husband John because of her differences in language and culture, Sandi’s failure as a young artist—indicate their failure to be incorporated in the adopted country despite their ardent attempts to be Americans. Their removal from the center to marginality creates a discrepancy not only in a material aspect but also in their subjectivity. The anxiety of living on the borderline of two cultures along with the gap between what they enjoyed in their past life—love, respect, stability, and security—and what they now lack makes them want to go back to the past, their home country, charioted on the wings of nostalgia.

There is no denying that America gave the Garcia women opportunities and offered them freedom from patriarchal domination, but they had to pay the price by suffering humiliation and ridicule and loneliness. Loneliness, which has been recorded as the key cause of nostalgia (Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt, & Routledge 305), paves their path to the past life. The lack of belongingness and their marginal subjectivities pushes them to a “perilous territory of not-belonging” (Said 177) and drives them into the realm of eternal solitude and nostalgia. Ritivoi asserts that nostalgia not only “express[s] alienation,” but can also “replenish and rebuttress our sense of identity by consolidating the ties with our history” (39). The transformations that

Sandhya and Yolanda go through connotes a crisis of feelings that leads them to wander between the past memories and present experience in order to reconstruct the self in relation to the new place. Nostalgia is for them, as pointed out by Svetlana Boym, “poetic creation, an individual mechanism of survival, a countercultural practice, a poison, or a cure” (“Nostalgia and its Discontents” 18). Their nostalgia, which is the outcome of the workings of the sociopolitical and cultural environment of the host country, demands a radical revision of the term. The depiction of the situations and experiences leading immigrant characters to nostalgia as a coping mechanism forces a new understanding of nostalgia not as an individual’s mere avoidance of present responsibilities or, in Boym’s words, “an abdication of personal responsibility [...] an ethical and aesthetic failure” (*The Future of Nostalgia* xiv), and certainly not as escapism, but as a form of agency and, as Fred Davis observes, “the search for continuity” (35), a search for a unified identity, a remedy from the trauma of losses—loss of home, culture, and language.

As Sandhya and Yolanda try to reformulate their fissured personal, ethnic, and national identities within new geographic landscapes, they are challenged by multiple adjustments. Despite the immigrant protagonists’ strenuous effort at language and cultural accommodation, dominant culture collaborates with social and economic constraints in alienating the immigrants in the adopted country. Nostalgia, which is the consequence of this alienation or estrangement, raises important questions about self-identity and what it means to belong to a place. Yolanda and Sandhya’s flexibility in reinventing themselves according to the ideological and cultural contours of the adopted land projects their willingness to be part of the new land, but various incidents and attitudes of the cultural majority make them realize that no matter how much they try they will not be considered true Americans. Their ethnicity and cultural differences weigh like a burden creating constraints on their path of integration. Conversely, the mainstream

alienates them for their ethnic and cultural differences, without taking into consideration their ardent willingness to be Americans. Try as they might, neither Yolanda nor Sandhya or any other protagonists in immigrant literary narratives can ever be fully absorbed into American institutions. Thus, existing socio-economic and political domination coupled with cultural hegemony generates nostalgia in the protagonists. Their nostalgia, as Ritivoi writes, is therefore “an enactment and consequence of this alienation,” and it raises important questions about the role of the past and the present, and most importantly about “what it means to belong someplace, about continuity and gaps in one’s personal history” (39). And it is these questions about self and identity that propel protagonists in immigrant literature to take action in finding the self and impel them to go back to the past. While some revise and re-envision the past through nostalgic remembrance, others go back physically to their original homeland in search of belongingness. The next chapter explores the consequence of such return. The following chapter, tracing the protagonists’ journey back to the native land, tries to investigate whether the nostalgia that drives them back home actually satiates their desire for belonging and whether it is actually a longing for their native land or a longing for socio-political empowerment and psychic solace.

Chapter Three

Panacea for Nostalgia: The Paradox of Returning Home

Nostalgia, in Andreea Deciu Ritivoi's words, can be said to be a "search for the remedy" to estrangement which can "lead to a kind of self-discovery as self-improvement" (39). It is this search for remedy to alienation that propels many of the protagonists in the literary texts concentrating on immigrant experience to go back to their native land either physically or mentally in nostalgic reminiscence. While characters like Juani in Achy Obejas' *Memory Mambo* and Nestor in Oscar Hijuelos' *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* lament not being able to go home, others, like Yolanda, the protagonist of Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, Pilar, the young protagonist of *Dreaming in Cuban* by Cristina Garcia, Oscar in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Tara, the central character of Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*, Feroza in Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat*, to name just a few, succeed in travelling back to the land of origin to counteract the sense of alienation and fragmentation they experience while living in the United States. But, paradoxically, once they return, they realize that the process of making oneself at home involves dynamic change and consequently face a different kind of alienation. Just as the archetypal nostalgic hero Odysseus in Homer's *The Odyssey*, who after returning to his beloved homeland Ithaca, once again becomes restless to venture out for adventure, in a similar manner, the protagonists who driven by nostalgia go back to their homeland face a unique dilemma upon their return. Like Odysseus, their quest for home and belongingness remains unfulfilled and ultimately they come back to their adopted land. This chapter is devoted to the profound exploration of the reasons behind such reverse journeys. A close examination of Pilar and Feroza's journey to their native land and their consequent return to the United States leads me to assert that the reason behind the reverse

journey is the temporal dimension of their nostalgia. That is, their nostalgia, which initiates their journey home, is not actually a longing for their homeland; it is instead, a yearning for the lost time—a time when they had authority and wholeness of identity. The return, however, is an essential part in the process of untangling the meaning of home and identity and renewing their lives in the United States. In this chapter, along with theories of nostalgia, I will make use of Gustavo Pérez Firmat's theory of immigrant integration as the framework to explain the paradox of dual alienation that results in something positive—the discovery of unique bicultural identity that is instantiated in the central characters of the two prominent novels in the literary corpus considered in this dissertation—and to explore how nostalgia and the return home contribute to having a secure anchorage in the adopted land.

Brief Overview of *Dreaming in Cuban*

Nostalgia often involves and demands transference to the place of loss, and it is such demand that motivates Pilar in Cristina Garcia's novel *Dreaming in Cuban* to travel to her homeland Cuba. The sociopolitical upheaval that followed the Cuban revolution of 1959 forced Pilar Puente's parents to immigrate to the United States when she was only two years old. Although Pilar leaves Cuba at a very early age, she tells the reader that her memory of Cuba is vivid: "I was only two years old when I left Cuba but I remember everything that's happened to me since I was a baby, even word-for-word conversations [...]. Mom tried to pull me away but I clung to Abuela and screamed at the top of my lungs" (26). Although she assimilates into the mainstream culture in the United States, Pilar is consumed by the feeling of displacement and alienation. As a result, she is, more often than not, burdened by nostalgic memories of Cuba and her grandmother. Pilar may have spent only two years in Cuba, but it is Cuba where she thinks

she belongs. She still considers Cuba to be her home and doesn't feel at home in the U.S. at all and nostalgically remarks, "[e]ven though I've been living in Brooklyn all my life, it doesn't feel like home to me" (58). This feeling of un-belongingness is exacerbated whenever there is any obstacles or crisis in her personal life; in fact, she holds the U.S. responsible for all her personal troubles. When Pilar discovers her father's extramarital affair, she blurts out, "[t]hat's it. My mind's made up. I'm going back to Cuba. I'm fed up with everything around here" (25), suggesting that in Cuba she expects to find solace or security. In another instance, in an answer to the query of Dr. Vincent, the psychiatrist who Pilar visits following the recommendation of the school nurse after being "kicked out" of school, Pilar says, "[b]ut what could I say? That my mother is driving me crazy? That I miss my grandmother and wish I'd never left Cuba?" (59). Pilar associates all the negative incidents happening in her life with the United States and believes that returning to Cuba would resolve all her problems.

Pilar's indecisiveness about her identity and her feeling of cultural in-between-ness, propel her to find out about her identity and her sense of belonging—a desire that is quite prominent in almost all immigrants. Her desire for roots and connections torments her constantly and her yearning for home is intensified whenever she hears the whistles of ships plying on East River: "Our house is on a cement plot near the East River. At night, especially in the summer when the sound carries, I hear the low whistles of the ships as they leave New York harbor. They travel south past the Wall Street skyscrapers, past Ellis Island [...] and head out to the Atlantic. When I hear those whistles, I want to go with them" (30-31). Pilar believes that going back to Cuba would help her in understanding where she belonged and nostalgically identifies Cuba as the space that will bring culmination to her search for a stable home. Hence, nostalgia here

emerges as a desire to reconnect to her origins, her roots that would help her to reconstruct her fragmented identity.

Years after her first attempt to return to the country fails, Pilar eventually succeeds in going back to Cuba with her mother, Lourdes. While in Cuba, Pilar reconnects with her grandmother, Celia del Pino. She spends most of the visit sitting with Celia on a wicker swing that faces the sea, listening to stories of her grandmother's life; she paints a portrait of Celia while they talk, and learns about Cuba and her grandmother. The trip to Cuba transforms Pilar; she says, "I wake up feeling different, like something inside of me is changing, something chemical and irreversible. There's a magic here working its way through my veins" (236). The journey to Cuba works as a positive and recuperative move that provides Pilar with access to a family history as well as Cuban culture that she was previously lacking; she can now, according to critic Katherine Payant, "preserve [the] family history and in the process know her own identity and place" (172). Although Pilar enjoys her time in Cuba with its intense and varied blues of the landscape, the tropical vegetation and most importantly, her time spent with her grandmother, her exuberance slowly dwindles as she becomes aware that this is not the Cuba she remembers, and a feeling of displacement resurges in her as she, with utter distress, realizes that she does not belong in Cuba. The Pilar who a few days before had said, "I may move back to Cuba someday and decide to eat nothing but codfish and chocolate" (173) now realizes the impossibility of living in Cuba and returns to the U.S. Furthermore, before leaving Cuba, she plays a part in her cousin Ivanito's escape from the country, not because she hates her native land, but because she realizes the difficulties of living in Cuba. Her return enables her to see the socio-economic and political complexities of Cuba, the deterioration of the country and its infrastructure, and the difficulty of adjusting in the real Cuba.

Brief Overview of *An American Brat: A Novel*

Feroza in *An American Brat: A Novel*, which portrays the South-Asian American immigrant experience in the United States, also revisits her native land Pakistan, only to be disillusioned and thus coming back to the U.S. In the novel, author Bapsi Sidhwa unveils the experiences and transformation of Feroza Ginwalla, a Pakistani girl who is sent to America by her family to expand her intellectual horizon and broaden her cultural outlook. Fearing that the current religious and political atmosphere of Pakistan would tarnish their daughter's viewpoints and turn her narrow-minded, her parents Cyrus and Zareen Ginwalla decide to send Feroza for a short visit to her uncle Manek in the United States. Although initially Feroza, like all other immigrants, faces predicaments in her process of acclimatization in the U.S. culture, she acculturates quite rapidly. When she first arrives in the United States she is not only perplexed by the different norms and cultural differences of the new country but also feels that living in a new land requires great strength, as the narrative voice conveys: "[i]t became clear to Feroza that to be this far from home, to have to cope with strangers and mysterious rites, was itself a test" (116). But soon enough, she learns to adjust to the new environment. In fact, her friendship with Jo, her roommate, facilitates the process of acculturation that prompts her not only to act, talk, or dress like an American girl, but also to drive, drink, and dance. The novel, through the depiction of the mental, psychological and socio-cultural conflicts, unfolds the gradual transformation of the shy conservative Pakistani girl Feroza to a confident and self-assertive woman.

Though both Feroza and her uncle, Manek assimilate into the American culture and enjoy life in their adopted country, their transformation should not be misconstrued as their total effacement of the memories of their homeland. In fact, at various times both are seen to be nostalgic for their homeland. When Manek first hears of Feroza's coming to the U.S., he gets

excited because “[h]aving been away almost three years, [he] was eager to see anyone from home” (26). Similarly, feeling of nostalgia and memories of homeland afflict Feroza at every step of her transculturation. After school, Feroza used to sit glumly in front of the television nursing her broken heart and thinking about home: “[s]he missed her grandmothers, her parents, their friends, her friends, her ayah, the incessant chatter of her cousins, and even the raucous chorus of the Main Market *mullahs* on Friday afternoons. She became unbearably homesick and found it impossible to work on her term paper” (162). Again, when she decides to go to Lahore during her vacation, she gets excited at the mere thought of the prospect of meeting her grandmothers, parents, relatives and friends. She “became increasingly excited as the date of her departure drew near [...] [and] wondered how she had borne being away from them so long. Her mind was already traveling, preparing her for the quantum change, transporting her to Lahore before her arrival” (236). Feroza’s exultant feeling and eagerness to go back to Lahore, the beloved city of her homeland, exemplifies how much she had missed her native land and longed to be there.

But the initial wave of euphoria at returning to Pakistan evaporates as Feroza perceives the changes that have taken place in her native land in her absence. She realizes that “time had wrought alterations she could not have foreseen—while her memory had preserved the people and places she knew, and their relationships with her, as if in an airtight jar” (235). Concurrently, she also feels that living in the U.S has transformed her views and perceptions regarding her host country. Feroza who had once been “scathingly critical of America,” of its bullying foreign policy and ruthless meddling in the affairs of vulnerable countries, now found herself defending it in front of her relatives: “[w]hich other country opened its arms to the destitute and discarded of the world the way America did? Of course it had its faults—terrifying shortcomings—but it

had God's blessings, too" (239). Such changes—both in the people of her country and her own perceptions—make her feel displaced in her place of familiarity, and “absorbing the undercurrent at some hidden level of her consciousness, [she] found her sense of dislocation deepen” (239). While at first (following harassment by customs and immigration officials) Feroza had declared that she did not want to stay in the U.S., after three years in that country, she ironically realizes that she can no longer stay in Pakistan, either, and must return to the U.S. Although she leaves her homeland with the excuse of completing her studies in the U.S., it is actually her feeling of dislocation that compels her to come back to the United States.

Nostalgia for Homeland—A Romanticized Imagining of the Homeland

Returning to the native homeland, considered the panacea for homesickness or nostalgia, paradoxically fails to provide Pilar and Feroza the solace and the sense of belonging that they desire. In fact, their decision to come back to the adopted land problematizes the prevailing concept of return to homeland as a cure for nostalgia and demands inquiry into the subject. The exultant feeling of happiness at being at the familiar space turns into discontentment when they face difficulty in adjusting to their surroundings. Their nostalgia slips into disappointment as they suffer reverse culture shock. A new kind of dissatisfaction and feeling of displacement engulf them as they try to reacquaint themselves in the familiar space of their native land. But no matter how much they try, they feel like misfits amid their family and the familiarity of home. Pilar and Feroza realize separation from the immediate familiar environment, their family and friends, and their homeland has created a fissure between them and their native land. Pilar returns to a Cuba that is entirely different from the Cuba of her nostalgia. During her stay on the island she feels that she was an outsider even in a space which she considered her own: “Cuba is

a peculiar exile, I think, an island-colony. We can reach it by a thirty-minute charter flight from Miami, yet never reach it at all” (219). She acknowledges that she can travel to Cuba, but can never reach the Cuba that exists in her nostalgia. The rose-colored image of Cuba that she had painted in her memory is not the Cuba she has returned to. Payant also points out that, “[l]ike many exiles who search for self by returning to the geographical space of the homeland, [Pilar] is unsuccessful” (171). She identifies the reason of such “unsuccessful” return as Pilar’s proclivity to live in a Cuba that existed only in her imagination and quoting Pérez-Firmat asserts, “‘imagination [where Pilar has lived] [*sic*] is *not* a place” (172, emphasis in original). Feroza also has the same feeling of dislocation when she returns to the country she always longed for. She not only has difficulty adjusting in it, but “was disconcerted to discover that she was a misfit in a country in which she had once fitted so well” (239). Their disappointment instantiates Svetlana Boym’s analysis of the nostalgic’s return in her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, where she writes that every return to actual birthplace or ancestral land gives us the same sensation of returning to where one has never been (353).

An analysis of such feeling and the immigrant protagonists’ overall situation reveals that their dissatisfaction is due to the discrepancy between the nostalgic picture of their homeland and the immediate perception of the land. The lost past and the non-integrated present compel nostalgic immigrants to create an idyllic picture of their past homeland. In literary theorist Linda Hutcheon’s words, it is rarely the past as actually experienced, rather, “it is the past as imagined, as idealized through memory and desire” (195); it bears repeating then that the past nostalgia is associated with is not the past that was actually experienced; instead, it is the past as imagined and idealized. Stuart Tannock has also provided a similar explanation of such propensity of nostalgia. In his view “nostalgia [...] invokes a positively evaluated past world in response to a

deficient present world,” but “the positively evaluated” past as a source for something now perceived to be missing should not be thought of as a time of general happiness, peacefulness, stability, or freedom(454). Tannock’s argument points to the fact that nostalgia tends to filter the unpleasant and fabricate a pleasing picture of the past. Life spent in their homeland may not have been a happy one, still when Pilar and Feroza remember the past they tend to “eliminate from memory or, at minimum, severely [...] mute the unpleasant, the unhappy, the abrasive” (Davis 37) and think of the past as the happy phase of their life. As a result, they fail to reach the land they search for because the home they quest for does not exist in reality, it is in fact “a home that no longer exists or has never existed” (Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* xiii).

And the reasons behind such romanticized imagination of the homeland are, as discussed in the previous chapters, estrangement and the sense of homelessness that the immigrant protagonists feel in the adopted land. The search for home and sense of belonging and identity are very strong in human existence, but for immigrants this search is complicated further by their movement between two cultures of native land and the host country. Homeland is associated with a feeling of security, of being rooted and having a sense of cohesion; this sense of belongingness and cohesion is ruptured in the host country where they suffer solitude and remain outside the social structures of the country. Lack of opportunities in the new land provoke them to contemplate on their disparaging existence in the present life and make them want to go back to their past, a past where they had full authority not only over themselves but also over their surroundings, where they were not besieged by the demand of the new land, where they were not stripped of power and authority and pushed to the periphery because of their race and ethnicity. Marginalization in several aspects of their life has a traumatic effect on them, which in turn makes them long for a life that they left behind, and this accentuates their nostalgia for the

homeland. Nostalgia thus becomes a defense mechanism against accelerated rhythm of change and economic shock therapy (Boym, *The Future* 64). To cope with the feelings of disenfranchisement and homelessness the immigrants construct an idealized and idyllic picture of their homeland. Hutcheon rightly points out that “[t]he aesthetics of nostalgia might, therefore, be less a matter of simple memory than of complex projection; the invocation of a partial, idealized history merges with a dissatisfaction with the present” (195).

Hence, it is the very irrecoverableness of the past, its inaccessibility, that likely accounts for a large part of nostalgia’s power. The tendency to idealize the lost homeland and to elevate and glorify the past life is part of a reaction to the humiliating and inadequate feelings experienced in the host country. Tannock explains this aptly:

Nostalgia, by sanctioning soothing and utopian images of the past, lets people adapt both to rapid social change and to changes in individual life histories—changes, in the latter case, that may well lead into social roles and positions (of adolescence, adulthood, old age) in which individual agency, sense of identity, and participation in community are severely restricted. (459)

The curtailed agencies and limited role in the adopted land draw immigrants back to the days spent in the native land. In contrast to their present fragmented and discontent life in the adopted land, they fantasize an idyllic picture of life in their native land. The tendency to romanticize the past is aggravated by the crisis they face in their personal life. It is seen that when protagonists like Pilar, Yolanda or Tara can’t tolerate the upheaval in their present life, their urgency to go back to their native land intensifies. Even though they may have suffered in their native land, their nostalgia obliterates the unpleasant and constructs an edenic picture of the native land. Salman Akhter, a prominent psychoanalyst, in his article “The Immigrant, the Exile, and the Experience of Nostalgia” propounds that facing the “mental pain” of separation, the immigrant readily resorts to a hypercathexis of the objects he has lost. This mechanism results in an idealization of the immigrant’s past (125). Hence, the place of origin, fantasized as edenic space,

fails to provide them the sense of belongingness that they sought after, and the disparity between the idyllic representation and the immediate perception of native land transforms their initial excitement to disappointment.

Nostalgia, Not Spatial but Temporal

The dissatisfaction or the counter cultural shock that the protagonists feel upon returning to their native land also raises serious question regarding the nature of their nostalgia. If their nostalgia for the homeland is not satisfied by their return to that homeland, then what are they nostalgic of? This question destabilizes the simple nature of nostalgia as a longing or desire to return to homeland. When we think of nostalgia or homesickness, we tend to think of it strictly in spatial term, that is, we hold space and location accountable for the development of nostalgia. To think of nostalgia as a relentless yearning for the homeland is too restrictive, and the fact that the return to the homeland neither ensures Pilar and Feroza's stability nor provides them the solace they sought encourages a reassessment of their nostalgia as a longing for any geographical space. Consenting with Boym who claims that "[a]t first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for different time—the time of our childhood . . ." (*The Future of Nostalgia* xv), I ascertain that the nostalgia that plagues Pilar and Feroza and many other protagonists in immigrant fiction is more of a matter of temporality than of spatiality. It is the past time that they lament for rather than the geographical space. As early as 1798, Immanuel Kant famously notes that people who did return home were usually disappointed because, in fact, they did not want to return to a *place*, but to a *time*, a time of youth. And time, unlike space, cannot be reinhabited (Hutcheon 194). If we analyze Pilar and Feroza's nostalgic reminiscence, we'll see that their nostalgia is not for the geographical space—their homeland, rather it is a

longing for the “unrepeatable and irreversible time” (Boym, *The Future* 13), a time of happiness, a time of authority and power that they spent in their native land.

Pilar and Feroza’s nostalgic reminiscences reveal that it is the time spent with their loved ones when they had a sense of belongingness that they actually yearn for. Pilar’s nostalgia for Cuba consists of memories of her time spent with her grandmother (26) or of her father’s ranch (28). After immigrating to the United States, Pilar maintains a connection with Cuba by writing to Celia occasionally. Her connection with her grandmother is so strong that her days would be punctuated by the thoughts of her grandmother; she would wonder “what Abuela Celia is doing right this minute” (137), and the nights would be spent in telepathic correspondence with her during which “mostly [she] hear[s] her [grandmother] speaking to [her] at night just before [she] fall[s] asleep” (29). Even when she suffers from identity crisis, she believes reunion with Celia would resolve her problem of belongingness. We hear her utter, “[i]f I could only see Abuela Celia again, I’d know where I belonged” (58). Hence, at the center of Pilar’s nostalgic reminiscence and her desire to return to Cuba is her grandmother with whom she had spent the most joyous period of her life.

Apparently, Pilar’s nostalgia seems to be of her homeland. Even as a mere child, while playing in the park of New York, she missed the beauty and the warmth of the island:

The air was different from Cuba’s. It had a cold, smoked smell that chilled my lungs. The skies looked newly washed, streaked with light. And the trees were different, too. They looked on fire. I’d run through great heaps of leaves just to hear them rustle like the palm trees during hurricanes in Cuba. But then I’d feel sad looking up at the bare branches and thinking about Abuela Celia. I wonder how my life would have been if I’d stayed with her. (32)

Again, once on the island, Pilar’s happiness knows no bounds at being in Cuba. She is enthralled by everything in Cuba, even the blue color of her surroundings mesmerizes her:

Until I returned to Cuba, I never realized how many blues exist. The aquamarines near the shoreline, the azures of deeper waters, the eggshell blues beneath my grandmother's eyes, the fragile indigos tracking her hands. There's a blue, too, in the curves of the palms, and the seashells and the plump gulls on the beach. The mole by Abuela's mouth is also blue, a vanishing blue. (233)

But in both the instances the beauty of Cuba is punctured by Abuela's reference. The first few lines of this quotation do show her enchantment with the island, but the last lines of the excerpt are important in unveiling the real source of her exuberant feeling. Pilar's tendency to bring in her Abuela whenever referring to the island reveals the key cause of her nostalgia—her grandmother Celia. In fact, her love and feeling for Celia supersedes her feeling for the island and even for her mother. Moreover, when Pilar left Cuba, she was only two years old and it goes without saying that at that age the significance of the country is minimal to a child. What gains significance at such a tender age are the happy moments spent with her grandmother, and the juxtaposition of Cuba and Celia reinforces the fact that her nostalgia is for her time spent with her Cuban grandmother rather than for the island Cuba. Space is associated with specific time and emotion in a complicated way. The emotionally charged time is linked to the geographical space and appeals to the imagination contributing to the nostalgia of the space, which is actually nostalgia for the bygone time. The time spent with her grandmother represents the uncomplicated time when Pilar's identity was not fractured and her existence was not challenged by the hegemonic forces.

To reinforce my claim about the temporality of nostalgia, I bring in the example of Feroza. Feroza, who despite having spent substantial years of her life in her native country, is nostalgic not for her country but for the bygone time. Unlike Pilar, who left Cuba before the formation of her identity, Feroza leaves Pakistan at the age of sixteen, when she has already developed a sense of belongingness in her country. Feroza initially came to the States for a short

visit and in comparison to Pilar, Feroza's bond to her country is stronger because of the long period of time she spent in her native land. Furthermore, while in Pakistan, she had been very concerned about the overall situation and politics of her country. Her concern for the country indicates Feroza's strong ties to her country, and thus it can be assumed that when she is nostalgic, it is the homeland—the geographical place—she is nostalgic for. But her return to her native land and consequent disenchantment forces us to rethink what she is nostalgic for—is it the place or the time of her youth? If she had been nostalgic of the geographic space, she would not have yearned for the joyous moments spent with her family and friends. She would have been more concerned about the welfare of the country and its people. Although she does exhibit her concern about the country to a certain level by rebuking her mother for not updating her about the news of the country, “[y]ou should have sent me newspaper clippings [...] I want to know what's going on here. After all, it's my country!” (237), she does not engage in action to alleviate the suffering of the people, nor does she express any desire to return to the country later on to contribute to its development. In fact, her dissatisfaction with the socio-political condition of Pakistan, and ultimately her decision to come back to the U.S and her resolution to never return, undercuts the spatial aspect of her nostalgia and highlights its temporal dimension. That nostalgia is actually associated more with temporality rather than with spatiality is also underscored by Hutcheon who notes that, “nostalgia is [...] what you ‘feel’ when two different temporal moments, past and present, come together for you and, often, carry considerable emotional weight” (199). And this is the reason why the protagonists are disheartened when they go back to their native land. The geographic space that they had cherished in their nostalgia has lost meaning and charm. It is in fact, the time—the time of their childhood, or their time of stability and security when their identity was complete—that they seek in their nostalgia.

Pilar and Feroza's dissatisfaction upon returning to their homeland, hence, establishes the fact that their nostalgia is temporal, a longing to return to the past time of psychic solace and power, rather than a return to the physical geographical place. Nostalgia becomes wistful recollection of "the way things were" and leads the protagonists to return to their native land in search of the time left behind because "allowing for returns, space promises 'reversibility,' in the most uniform and accessible sense" (Ritivoi 117). Although space promises reversibility, it cannot satiate their longing. Even if the characters stayed back in their native land and had to "commit" to their country of origin by reigniting their ties to it through active living, they probably would not have been able to fulfill their longing because they would always be looking for the type of life they had spent in the past; that is, they would always be in search of the past time. Moreover, the fact that the return to the native land does not assuage their displaced feeling goes to show that their nostalgia is indeed nostalgia for time and not for place. Knowing well the flaws of the United States as well as the harsh reality that they may never gain a central position and would be living in the fringe of the society as outsiders, Feroza and Pilar decide to come back to America to set anchorage in their adopted land and renegotiate their fragmented identity.

Nostalgia's Contribution in Establishing Anchorage in the Host Country

The journey to the homeland can thus be seen as a renewal or re-vision of the self that helps the protagonists to redefine themselves in light of their experience and facilitates their anchorage in the adopted land. Boym has rightly said "[h]omecoming does not signify a recovery of identity; it does not end the journey in the virtual space of imagination" (50) but instead is a continuation of a new journey. The defamiliarization and the sense of distance in their homeland lead Feroza and Pilar to venture into a new journey of reassessing their connection with their

host country, and subsequently they reveal that although the insight is complicated, they belonged more in the U.S. than in their native land. This transformation in their overall perspectives and attitude towards their adopted land help them create a new bond or relationship with the U.S., a phenomenon that Gustavo Pérez-Firmat terms as “institution”—“the establishment of a new relation between person and place” (11). The work of Pérez-Firmat, Cuban-American critic and writer, is particularly revealing on this topic. Although writing primarily with Cuban-American literature and Cuban culture in the United States in mind, his ideas regarding the stages of evolution in the process of this immigrant groups’ adaptation and settling in the U.S. can be extended to the South Asian and Latino immigrant groups here considered.

In his book *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way*, Pérez-Firmat outlines three-stages that immigrants go through to establish themselves firmly in the adopted land—the U.S. According to his theory, the first stage is the “substitutive” stage, during which exiles and immigrants try to deny their dislocation. It is the stage at which they try to “create substitutes or copies of the home culture” (7) in the new geographical space. But no matter how much they try to reduplicate home, in Pérez-Firmat’s view, substitution is always partial because “[t]he exile aspires to reproduce, rather than recast, native traditions” (8). The compensatory theme of the substitutive stage is “we are (still) there” (8). But very soon they realize that grounded in compensatory substitutions, the recreation of the homeland in the adopted land is an act of imagination, and “[g]radually, the awareness of displacement crushes the fantasy of rootedness” (10). This ushers in the second stage which Pérez-Firmat names as “destitution” meaning not having a place to stand on. This is the stage at which a feeling of alienation and rootlessness engulfs the immigrants and they constantly feel “that the ground has been taken out from under

them, that they no longer know their place, that they have in fact lost their place” (10). At this stage, the immigrants feel estranged and disconnected. The feeling of “we are here” transition into the feeling of “we are nowhere” (10). And finally, destitution gives way to the third stage—“institution,” which is the establishment of a new relation between person and place (11). To institute is—in Pérez-Firmat’s sense of the word—to stand on one’s ground, to dig in a denture. The theme of the third stage is neither “we are there” nor “we are nowhere,” but rather, “here we are” (11). As the foreign country loses its foreignness, this stage signals transition of the immigrant groups from the feeling of being in the air to coming down to the earth by anchoring in the new geographical space. These three moments or stages, which in Pérez-Firmat’s words “chart an individual’s or a community’s slow acceptance of life in a new country,” (11) also reflect Pilar and Feroza’s slow acceptance of and acclimatization in the U.S.A.

Feroza’s gradual passage from “substitution” to “destitution,” where she feels estranged from her surrounding and finally moving onto the third stage of “institution,” where she lays firm foundation in the U.S. is initiated and reinforced by her journey home. Although Feroza’s journey home is not prompted by her desire to know the roots, it nevertheless aids her in determining where she belonged. She realizes that “[l]ike Manek, she has become used to the seductive entitlements of the First World” (Sidhwa 312), and the girl who had come to the States only for three months, and who had felt “tragic sense of loss” (Sidhwa 78) at her uncle’s decision to stay back in the U.S. realizes with dismay that “[t]here would be no going back for her” (317). In fact, her journey to Pakistan, where she felt the same level of displacement, aids her to evaluate her position in both the countries and ultimately choose the place where she could have an anchorage: “[f]rom her visit to Lahore, Feroza knew she had changed. [...] Although the sense of dislocation, of not belonging, was more acute in America, she felt it would be more tolerable

because it was shared by thousands of newcomers like herself” (312). Even in her most vulnerable condition, when she is heartbroken and is completely enshrouded by nostalgia, she knows that she could never return to Pakistan. After the break up with her American boyfriend, David, when the ghazals¹ trigger her nostalgia for her country and she weeps and yearns for her friends and the land of poets and ghazals she had left behind, even at such moments of homesickness, Feroza acknowledges that she cannot go back: “[f]or even in her bereft condition, she knew there was no going back for her, despite the poets and her friends” (311). Instead, her nostalgia and her visit to Pakistan make her more confident of herself and her place in the U. S. As she reminisces, she realizes the various constraints—social, political and religious—that affected her native land would curtail her freedom and individualism that she had grown used to: “[t]hese and the other constraints would crush her freedom, a freedom that had become central to her happiness. The abandon with which she could conduct her life without interference was possible only because of the distance from her family and the anonymity America provided” (Sidhwa 312). Feroza knows well that living in the U.S. may entail a degree of isolation and marginalization, but she knows the United States is where she will find greater happiness precisely because the abstract concept was codified into the very cultural fabric of the host country and was left for her to define: “the pursuit of happiness was enshrined in the constitution of the country she had grown to love, despite her growing knowledge of its faults” (Sidhwa 314).

Similarly, Pilar’s journey to Cuba precipitates her movement to the third stage—“institution,” which aids her in forging a new relation between herself and the U.S. In fact, her inquiry into her roots and her belongingness is answered by her trip to Cuba. During her stay on

¹ A lyric poem with a fixed number of verses and a repeated rhyme, typically on the theme of love, and normally set to music.

the island, Pilar understands how much accustomed she had become to the American life—its culture and its freedom. As she reflects on the subject, she realizes that Cuba would constrain her in various ways. She will not only be deprived of the things she was used to (it would be “hard to imagine existing without Lou Reed” [235]), but it would also cost her freedom of expression. As an artist, her work would suffer restriction here because, as her *abuela* says, “Cuba is still developing, [...] and can’t afford the luxury of dissent [...]. Within the revolution, everything; against the revolution, nothing” (235). Despite the fact that she loves being in Cuba, all these factors help Pilar determine the place where she belongs. She knows her decision to return to the U.S. would lead her to lose Cuba and Celia again; nonetheless, she resolves to go back to New York because that is where she belongs:

I love Havana, its noise and decay and painted ladyness. I could happily sit on one of those wrought-iron balconies for days, or keep my grandmother company on her porch, with its ringside view of the sea. I’m afraid to lose all this, to lose Abuela Celia again. But sooner or later I’d have to return to New York. I know now it’s where I belong—not *instead* of here, but *more* than here. (236)

Her utterance that she belongs to New York “not *instead* of here, but *more* than here” (236), indicates her realization of where she belonged. Ibis Gomez-Vega in her article “The Journey Home Defining Identity in Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban*” asserts that Pilar’s return to Cuba is a reclamation of identity which provides her the opportunity to define her place within the world that she must inhabit (98), and in that sense her “visit to Cuba helps her to understand her connection to the island and her connection to New York, the place where she can begin to create her own world with full knowledge of her Cuban ancestry, of who she is” (98). The process of returning to the land of origin and experiencing the disintegration in the childhood home lead to better understanding of the self and her place in both the native and adopted land. She recognizes that the doubleness of her identity can’t be resolved by place, and so she belongs

where her identity gains the most expression. Pilar realize that her past home would remain only in the past and generate in her the strength, to use Pérez-Firmat's words, "to stand on one's ground, to dig in a denture" (11), and to have a firm foundation in the adopted land.

The physical return as well as nostalgia, thus, bring culmination to Feroza and Pilar's precarious state of belongingness by initiating their institutionalization or establishment in the adopted country. Although the gnawing feeling of homelessness and rootlessness that both of the protagonists have prior to their visit to the land of origin is not alleviated in their homeland; the visit prompts their understanding of their bicultural uniqueness and initiates their transition from the second stage of "destitution" to the third stage, "institution," where they establish a new relation to their host country, the U.S. So far, both Pilar and Feroza had oscillated between the past and present and were ambivalent about their belongingness, but the visit helps them to realize that although their original home will always be within them, they are also very much American. This understanding leads them to achieve a balance between the past Cuba/Pakistan and the present U.S.A. And for those who cannot return to the native land, nostalgia becomes their means of recreating the past in their thoughts of home from where they get sustenance to move forward. Going back helps the protagonists to connect the past with the present, which gives them a strong sense of belongingness in their adopted country. Hence, nostalgia does not necessarily entail retreat; it can equally function as retrieval (Tannock 458); that is, it can work to retrieve the past for support in building the future.

Nostalgia's Contribution in Identity Formation

Nostalgia, not only assists the protagonists in determining their space of belongingness, but also contributes in constructing an identity that will help them in building a stable future. My

claim of nostalgia's positive effect on identity formation does not mean that I am oblivious of the fact that there are instances where nostalgia impairs identity or constrains the self in such ways that the nostalgic person is stuck in the past and thereby loses all capabilities to function in the present state. Nestor, the younger Castillo brother in Oscar Hijuelos' *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, is an example of the negative effects of nostalgia. Nestor's nostalgia or "eternal homesickness" (94) for Cuba keeps him from constructing an identity based on the needs of the new country and thereby problematizes his life in the U.S. But aside from such instances, sociological studies done on nostalgia have suggested that, in most cases, nostalgia facilitates continuity of identity. Fred Davis' sociological examination of nostalgia explains how nostalgia, by allowing individuals connect the past to the present, plays an integral part in developing a sense of who they are. According to Davis, nostalgia allows individuals to preserve their identity by maintaining internal continuity in the face of external discontinuity, that is, nostalgia attends to the pleas for continuity of identity (33). In his view, nostalgic experience cultivates appreciative stances to former selves and in doing so it can make the present seem less frightening and more assimilable (36). A similar attribute of nostalgia can also be traced in Sociologist Janelle Wilson's discussion of nostalgia in which she states that "[n]ostalgia is an intra-personal expression of self which subjectively provides one with a sense of continuity" and "serves the purpose of bonding" (19). Nostalgia, is thus, "one of the means [...] we employ in the never ending work of constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing our identities" (Davis 31).

By going back time and again to the past through nostalgia and later on literally going to the place of nostalgia, Cuba, Pilar ultimately composes a bicultural identity. "Biculturation," as Pérez-Firmat advocates, is neither assimilationist nor oppositional in character. In fact, in his words "biculturation designates not only contact of cultures; in addition, it describes a situation

where the two cultures achieve a balance that makes it difficult to determine which is the dominant and which is the subordinate culture” (6). Hence, bicultural identity is not about discarding one culture in favor of the other, or prioritizing one culture over the other, instead in bicultural identity one culture very well complements the other. There is no doubt that the return to the native land allows Pilar to reconnect to her roots, but this journey simultaneously provides her with a new perception of herself. Pilar’s Cuban experience transforms her forever as she realizes that just as she cannot deny her Cubanness, she cannot also reject her Americanness. In fact, “the journey home to Cuba allows her to translate and define herself” (Gomez-Vega 99). She comprehends that she would not be just an American or a Cuban, instead, she would have parts of both the culture in her and ultimately renews her connection with her adopted land. And this realization guides her to form a bicultural identity based on both the cultures that allows her to attain a wholeness which so far have been missing in her life. William Luis has rightly pointed out, “Pilar will live in the United States, but she will dream of Cuba” (*Dances Between Two Cultures* 234). Nostalgia, as Elena Machado Sáez has noted, “consequently serves as the route Pilar travels in order to recuperate her family memories as well as a sense of her own identity and space of belonging” (131).

Like Pilar, Feroza’s fragmented identity in the U.S. undergoes reconstruction after her visit to her native land. Her visit to the native land and the nostalgic reminiscences of the life that she had lived in Pakistan lead her to compare and contrast her life in both countries and assist her in composing an identity that is based neither solely on Pakistani nor on American culture. As Feroza retreats to the nostalgia of the past, she realizes that the facilities, freedom and privacy that her adopted land provided her with have become more precious to her than the family and friends that she has left behind. She comprehends that “[h]owever comforting the interaction of

the family and friends was, they would fritter away her hours in activities she has grown away from, and their habitual meddling would never allow her control over her life” (Sidhwa 312). In addition, the actual journey to the homeland is conducive of Feroza’s understanding of the past and present and necessitates a reconstruction of her identity. Her conscious and careful choice of staying back in America, nevertheless, does not mean she discards her Pakistani identity altogether. On the contrary, her nostalgic reminiscences of her past life assist her in preserving her Pakistani Parsee traits and thereby forming a bicultural identity that becomes complete when aspects of both the cultures coexist in balanced equilibrium. Feroza not only embraces the Americanized way of life without any reticence, but also retains the cultural and religious traits of her own culture. It is seen that in moments of distress and loneliness, she turns to her own cultural rituals for solace:

The first evening on her return to Denver, Feroza dug out her *sudra* and *kusti*. They had been hibernating for the longest time. Before going to bed, she said her *kusti* prayers and stood, hands joined, invoking Ahura Mazda’s blessings and favor. All at once the image of the holy *atash* in the fire temple in Lahore, pure and incandescent on its bed of ashes, formed behind her shut lids. Its glow suffused her with its tranquility and strength. (317)

For the immigrant protagonists, nostalgia becomes the only means by which they can still have connection to their native culture. Davis perceives nostalgia as a psychological buffer amidst (1) fear, discontent, anxieties or uncertainties, and (2) times when emotions and cognitive circumstances threaten identity continuity. When an individual’s sense of self is threatened, nostalgia provides a coping mechanism by which people can maintain or reconstruct their identity. Nostalgia helps Feroza, as investigated by Sedikides *et al.*, in boosting perceptions of life as meaningful and assuages existential threat (306). By providing Feroza with the “tranquility and strength” (Sidhwa 317) necessary to cope with her present life, the nostalgic

remembrances assist in constructing a bicultural identity, which is indeed an “equilibrium, however tense or precarious, between the two contributing cultures” (Pérez-Firmat 6).

Thus nostalgia, by providing resolutions to the fragmentation and displacement, assists in constructing a stable identity. Indeed, theologian and philosopher Ralph Harper has rightly noted, “[t]he homesick man [...] looks to the past not because he does not want the future, but because he wants a true presence” (26). Both Pilar and Feroza understand that they can never belong fully to one place nor can their identity be formed based on features of any one particular culture. Their realization that their home culture will always be within them, despite being very much American, drives Pilar and Feroza to forge an identity that situates the two cultures as “appositional” rather than “oppositional” (Pérez-Firmat 6). Their travel to the land of origin, either physically or mentally, in search of a stable South Asian or Latino/a identity helps them to construct their present South Asian American and Latino/a American identity. It is nostalgia that motivates them to go back and initiates this process of change. Hence, nostalgia does not simply comment on the difference between past and present, rather it impacts the subjectivity of the protagonists and changes their viewpoints about the present; it helps in adjusting to the challenges of the present condition. Functioning as an intermediary between the past and the present, nostalgia plays a vital role in the formation and maintenance of personal identity (Ritivoi 31). Their nostalgia, thus, as Ritivoi has said, mandates a constant search for the self, an effort to define and redefine identity by pondering its prior stages of manifestation, and by finding connections between the past and the present, as well as anticipating the future (10). That is, nostalgia helps in bridging the two cultures and constructing the potential bicultural identities that are acceptable in each culture and necessary for building a stable future.

The visit to the homeland, however, does not purge the immigrant protagonists of their nostalgia. Rather, their nostalgia has no cure because as indicated by Ritivoi, its cause is not the separation from places and people; instead, what triggers nostalgia is the irreversibility of time (117). Hence, those who have not reached the stage of “institution” will continue to suffer from nostalgia since, as discussed in the preceding paragraphs, their nostalgia is a longing for an irretrievable time that is uncontaminated by the miseries and troubles of the real world. However, their nostalgia may also function, as said earlier, in a positive manner; instead of being retrospective, nostalgia can also be prospective because “[t]he fantasies of the past, determined by the needs of the present, have a direct impact on the realities of the future” (Boym, “Nostalgia and its Discontents” 8). Ritivoi, Davis and Tannock have also highlighted the positive affect of nostalgia by indicating that instead of creating a hindrance in the functioning of present life, it assists in the continuity of identity. In Ritivoi’s words, “nostalgia can be defined as an effort to discover meaning in one’s life, to understand oneself by making better comparisons between the past and the present, and thus integrating experiences into a larger schema of meaning” (29). In fact, nostalgia, by connecting the past with the present, helps the protagonists Pilar and Feroza to have solid ground in the U.S. Referring to cognitive psychologist Shirley Fisher’s work, *Homesickness, Cognition, and Health*, Ritivoi also advocates that the constant “mental visits” to an inaccessible home, or one forever relegated to the past, become a way of adjusting to change and coping with difference. In her view, at some point, the element of pain disappears altogether and a new sense of familiarity is superimposed on the unfamiliar (31). Fisher’s conclusion—that although those suffering homesickness “have cognitive structures which favor domination of the immediate past” (87) they ultimately engage the same cognitive structures that can facilitate a transition to the present—explains how Pilar and Feroza’s adaptation leads to the creation of a

new home in the adopted land. Nostalgia, therefore, assists Pilar and Feroza to adjust to the new space by revealing patterns and retracting the same characteristics even in the midst of difference (Ritivoi 119). It is by reliving the past that the protagonists of the ethnic novels attempt to have a solid grip on their present. Hence, nostalgia imbues life with meaning and facilitates coping in the U.S. It also provides them with the energies to bring change in their present condition. In the chapter that follows, I discuss the importance of immigrant novels in the twenty-first globalized world. In doing so, I refute the allegation that this branch of literature is apolitical by demonstrating how the writers through the use of various narrative forms and tropes, of which nostalgia is of great significance, critique the social disparity and inequality that still persist within societies comprised of various ethnic groups.

Chapter Four

Functions of Immigrant Novels in a Globalized Twenty-First Century

In the present age of globalization, immigration has become a major phenomenon worldwide. According to the United Nations' *International Migration Report 2015*, the number of international migrants worldwide has grown rapidly over the past fifteen years, reaching 244 million in 2015, up from 222 million in 2010, 191 million in 2005, and 173 million in 2000 (5). The movement of such large groups of people across national borders has amplified the importance of immigrant literature within the ongoing conversation about the social and economic hardship faced by immigrants globally. But unfortunately, many critics have not only accused this branch of literature of being hackneyed and apolitical—a mere rendition of arrival and assimilation—but have also challenged it as being commodified. In this final chapter, contending against those who consider this literary corpus as apolitical and a commodification of immigrant experience, I contest that the literature of immigrant experience is very much political and not at all a commodification of immigrant experience. Instead, this branch of literature plays an unequivocal role in forcing mainstream readers to be conscious of the socio-economic disparities and discrimination inherent in the immigrant experience in America. The works through trenchant criticism, which many a times may be covert and nuanced, uncover the disparity and discrimination that exist in society even today.

Relying on Fredric Jameson's theory of "political unconscious" and Ramón Saldívar's theoretical perspective expressed in *Chicano Narratives: The Dialectics of Difference*, I demonstrate the ways in which narratives of immigrant experience have cultural and political implications. And depending on Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez' investigation in *The Latino/a Canon and the Emergence of Post-Sixties Literature*, I refute the allegations of

commodification of ethnic experience, thereby highlighting the importance of immigrant literature in the globalized twenty-first century.

Functions of Immigrant Literature

In the United States, immigrant and ethnic novels have been instrumental in shedding light on the encumbered state of civil rights, and thereby challenging the notion that the Civil Rights Movement of the second half of the twentieth century definitively guaranteed social equality to all the citizens of this country regardless of race, sex, national origin and religion. While artistic expression and the creative impulse is always behind literary production, I argue that writers who focus their works on the complexities of the immigrant experience do so to bring forth changes in the mindset of the mainstream population by laying bare the impact of certain social factors that policy statements and statistics often ignore, factors such as persistent ethnic discrimination and racism. To the degree that readers recognize their social realities in the literary works they consume, such works can be accepted as legitimate and useful texts in the formation of the collective imagination.

The idea that literature reflects the nature of society goes back to Plato, and historian Bernard DeVota picks up on this idea by asserting that “[l]iterature is a record of social experience, an embodiment of social myths and ideals and aims, and an organization of social beliefs and sanctions” (qtd. in Albrecht 426). In fact, the field of literary studies is essentially driven by the assumption that literature not only mirrors the beliefs, values, and actions of society but also shapes—and is concomitantly shaped—by society. The function of immigrant literature is precisely in line with this assumption, taking as its *raison d’être* to unearth the inequalities and subjugations that immigrants encounter in the adopted land in an effort to

reshape the perceptions and attitudes of the mainstream in this regard. As the focus of this dissertation is on the works of Asian American and Latino/a American writers, it is through the discussion of their works that I intend to illustrate the relevance of this branch of literature.

While discussing the differences between the earlier and recent immigrant writers, Kathrine B. Payant, who has written and edited multiple essays and books on immigrant experiences, asserts that one of the salient features of contemporary immigrant writing is the authors' tendency to critique American culture and finding it wanting. In her words, "[t]hough acknowledging the lure of American freedom and affluence, newer¹ immigrant writers see a loss of their cultural roots, the racism and violence of American city life, and the materialism and hypocrisy of middle-class American mainstream culture" (xxiii). Their writings cast a critical eye on the American society that bars immigrants from social, economic and political enfranchisement and subjects them to discrimination based on national origin. In support of Payant's observation, the analysis presented thus far confirms that contemporary U.S. Latino and South Asian authors of immigrant literature use their writings, and in some cases the description of their immigrant experience, as a medium to unveil the systematic exploitation and oppression that subjugate the immigrant populace. Through mimetic representation of the lived experiences of the immigrants, these writers provide readers with a mirror image of the frustrations attendant to daily combat with the hegemony of the dominant culture so that members of mainstream society can be made aware of the wrongs done on the immigrants and endeavor to make positive changes. Concurrently, by depicting inequality and discrimination, this literature strives to make

¹ Immigrants entering the United States of America in the 20th century. Payant, though, considers new immigrant literature as the literature that are produced by the group of immigrants immigrating since 1965 (xx).

members of the minority groups more aware of the politics of power so that they too can mobilize for social change.

The absence of acrid overt socio-political criticism against the mainstream in the contemporary immigrant novels has given many a critic the base to indict these works as apolitical. But a close analysis of these works will attest that although contemporary immigrant novels ostensibly circumvent the political fervor in their writing, they are indeed very much socially and politically charged. Marxist political theorist Fredric Jameson's theory of the "political unconscious" is quite useful in unraveling the socio-political preoccupation of the texts that lie concealed under the labels of "ghetto fiction" or bildungsroman. In his seminal work, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Art*, Jameson asserts that all texts embody history in their form and that texts are themselves historical events. Although historical events may be present on a symbolic or unconscious plane, history is always present in every text. By history and historical events he means class struggle and economic evolution. He opposes the view that literary creation can take place in isolation from its political context stating that, "there is nothing that is not social and historical— [...] everything is 'in the last analysis' political" (20). Hence, according to Jameson, a literary text is not "a free-floating object in its own right" (38) that is produced in isolation; rather, like all cultural artifacts, literary texts are socially symbolic acts (20); that is, all narratives have social, historical and political contexts. Very often, however, the historical and political dimensions of a text remain buried beneath their narrative surfaces. Jameson terms this as the "political unconscious." In his view, all literature is formed by the political unconscious and is a symbolic mediation on the destiny of community (70). "The function and necessity" of "the doctrine of a political unconscious," writes Jameson, lies in "detecting the traces of that uninterrupted narrative," and "restoring to the surface of the

text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history” (20). This restoration can be achieved by mediatory reading that will help in grasping both the surface level of the novel and its ‘unconscious’ social reading.

Mediation, in Jameson’s words, is “the classical dialectical term for the establishment of relationships between [...] the formal analysis of a work of art and its social ground, or between the internal dynamics of the political state and its economic base” (39). The dialectical mediation helps reveal both the surface level of a text and its ‘unconscious’ social reading. A mediated reading, as recommended by Jameson, will reveal that novels like *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, *The House on Mango Street*, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, *Bodega Dreams*, *An American Brat: A Novel*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* or the collected stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* are neither mere narratives of coming of age, nor mere accounts of the initial struggle of settling in an adopted land, nor are they a simple delineation of identity crises or the protagonists’ acculturation and adjustment to American social mores; rather, underneath the familiar narrative arcs of so-called ghetto fiction and the bildungsroman lie the certain unconscious anxieties—the social, historical, and political context that marginalizes the protagonists in all sectors of life. But while some texts project these issues explicitly, others may present the social, historical and political dimensions on a symbolic or unconscious plane.

A mediated reading or in-depth analysis of immigrant narratives reveals that one of the preoccupations of immigrant narratives is the demystification of the notion of tolerance and equality that the hegemonic culture claims to have established. The Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, which galvanized a number of other disadvantaged or excluded groups in American society, brought changes in the lives of ethnic minorities. Long silent groups such as Mexican Americans and Asian Americans began speaking out angrily against discrimination and formed

their own movements for civil rights, similar to those of the African Americans (Payant xx). However, the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s and 1970s that aimed to put an end to the long history of exploitation, discrimination, poverty, and political disenfranchisement, failed to materialize many of the means by which freedom from social inequity could be guaranteed. There is no denying that the movements have led to the enactment of numerous laws to counteract discrimination, but unfortunately, those laws are confined within the books only; in the lived-experience—as reflected in the emergent literature of the time—those social ills persist till this day. On the other hand, citizenship, which has long been understood as a legal status, a relationship between an individual and the nation-state that defines his or her political membership in society (Barbalet), though granted, did not guarantee immigrants and ethnic minority groups equal treatment and opportunities. It goes without saying that though they have the citizenship status on paper, it is the racialized discrimination and the Othering mentality of the hegemonic group (which is much harder to address officially) that make full citizenship go unrealized. The predicaments and social injustices that the protagonists in *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and *Unaccustomed Earth* go through despite being naturalized citizens give testimony to the fact that although the U.S. has come a long way in establishing many rights of people, the rights of naturalized citizens and ethnic minorities have not been equally safeguarded.

In fact, the civil rights struggle for inclusion and racial equality persists even to this day. There may not be outright physical lynching or blatant racism in today's U.S., but racism is still a pressing problem. Today, racism has taken on a more subtle form that is built into the system. The persistence of discrimination and racial tension in the United States in the present moment, in Lisa Lowe's view, "derives not from a failure of strategy or lack of will on the part of the

movements for civil rights but from the continuation of a system of property that profits through racialization” (24). That racial segregation and stark inequality is still a reality in the twenty first century is also explicit in Suzanne Oboler’s comments regarding citizenship and belongingness in the U.S. In her article “Citizenship and Belonging: The Construction of US Latino Identity Today,” she asserts that

[t]oday, racial profiling has become a quintessentially patriotic and “pro-American” act, laying bare the extent to which everyone in U.S. society has long been socialized to understand and reproduce, at any moment, and almost on command, the mechanisms of discrimination that confirm the intransigent racial bias that has historically been deeply embedded in every aspect of life in the USA. (117-18)

Despite the fact that many South Asian and Latino/a Americans have been in the U.S. for seven or more generations and some, in fact, can trace their ancestral ties to this land to a time before it became the U.S. territory after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848, they are treated as perpetual foreigners and denied many of the American civil rights². In response to the non-normative experience of those living in the United States without feeling and being treated as integral strands of the social fabric as their non-immigrant counterparts, most of the novels produced by writers of immigrant experience are politically oriented records of the social reality of the time. Decoding these novels will reveal the various forms of racialized discrimination and suppression that immigrants and ethnic minorities are constantly subjected to.

² Although the treaty of Hidalgo promised to accept the Mexicans living in the newly acquired lands as American citizens and assured the civil rights of Mexican nationals living within the new boundaries of the United States, in reality the promises was not fulfilled. For example, the treaty explicitly guaranteed Mexican Americans the right to their property, language, and culture, but in reality it was not honored as many Mexicans were displaced from their lands.

Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, Helena María Viramontes' *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* are just a few prominent novels among a growing corpus of texts that throw light particularly on immigrants and ethnic minorities' exclusion from the fundamental rights of medical care, fair working conditions, and proper education. The fact that immigrants and ethnic minorities are still fighting against poverty, unemployment, and racial disparities in education, housing, working conditions, and health care indisputably prove that the issues mobilizing civil rights activists in the 1960s remain contested in the 2000s. "The efforts to deny undocumented immigrants medical care and schooling and to prohibit legal immigrants from participating in state and federal programs" according to Lowe, "are the newest forms of surveillance and harassment for immigrant communities" (175). Lowe's comment testifies to the continuum of racial oppression and exploitation that these groups—both documented and undocumented immigrants—are subject to regardless of the fact that they contribute immensely to the overall economy of the country. It is on the labor of people like Biju (protagonist in Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* who is the representative of the restaurant workers and cooks), Estrella and her entire family, and Alejo (central characters in Viramontes' *Under the Feet of Jesus* representing the farm workers) that the U.S. thrives on, but regrettably, instead of acknowledging their contribution let alone bettering their condition, they are pushed to oblivion to be forgotten. By delineating the events of everyday life, writers of immigrant narratives like Cisneros, Desai, and Viramontes unveil the oppressive social structure that works within the society to subjugate its members. Here I discuss much talked about and written on novel of Viramontes' *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Viramontes uses the narrative of migrant farm workers to expose the various premises of oppression and exclusion that resonate the findings of Lowe's research. *Under the Feet of Jesus* is not only a bildungsroman that traces

the coming of age and maturation of the central protagonist Estrella but is also considered a literary work that has a strong socio-political agenda. In fact, the novel has been very often interpreted as a “sharply poignant critique of corporate agricultural practices” and a “testimony” meant to “disrupt the hegemonic narrative” of dominant American culture (Short 5; Shea 137).

The novel, through the life of Estrella and her migrant family, exposes the immeasurable hardship and the agonies that migrant field workers endure. *Under the Feet of Jesus*, written at a time when the reactionary response to the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s reached its peak in 1980s and then again renewed in 1994 (Beck and Rangel 18), brings to light the systematic process by which the capitalist society oppresses the migrant workers and details the various levels of exploitation that the working families are subject to, ranging from substandard housing, minimal wages, unhealthy work condition, pesticide exposure, child labor, and inaccessibility to medical care and social services. Through this novel, Viramontes exposes the ruthlessness of the American agricultural and food industry that uses the rhetoric of employment to rationalize the exploitation of migrant workers. The author, in particular, shatters the illusion of a fair economic system benefitting farmers and farm workers by exposing the hardship that lies beneath the false picture of the healthy and content farm worker presented to the consumer:

Carrying the full basket to the [sorting spot] was not like the picture on the red raisin boxes Estrella saw in the market, not like the woman wearing a fluffy bonnet, holding out the grapes with her smiling, ruby lips, the sun a flat orange behind her. The sun was white and it made Estrella’s eyes sting like an onion, and the baskets of grapes resisted her muscles, pulling their magnetic weight back to the earth. The woman with the red bonnet did not know this. (49-50)

A mediated reading of the novel reveals the workings of American capitalism that exploits the immigrant workers to gain utmost profit. The discrepancy between Estrella’s suffering and the commercialized idyllic picture of the smiling woman on the raisin box, in fact, challenges the

prevailing myth that such work offers migrant and immigrant workers a means out of poverty and a legitimate place within a capitalist economy. Indeed, Viramontes is not merely narrating the story of an indomitable Latina who is ready to fight everyone; instead, at the core of the narrative is a scathing criticism of the inhumanity and the oppression that the farm workers must contend with.

Through another child worker, Alejo, and a harrowing experience, his pesticide poisoning, Viramontes concurrently expresses her contempt for the employers for whom profit is much more important than human life and the society that not only legalizes the use of pesticide without providing proper precaution but also bars its members from adequate medical care. While feeling the effects of the poison, Alejo is described as “still [holding] onto a branch tightly [...], afraid he would fall long and hard, like the insects did” (77). By comparing Alejo’s effort to survive after being affected by the poison of pesticide with that of an insect, Viramontes points out how diminished these migrant workers are to their employers and the system that intrinsically reduces their humanity. As a result of the employers’ callousness, Alejo falls severely ill, and in spite of his citizenship rights, he fails to get access to proper medical treatment. The violation of his right to medical care projects the hollowness of a system that has yet to fulfill the rights of its people. Anne Shea claims that “[b]y bringing into visibility the systemic violence that bears down on the lives of migrant workers, Viramontes denaturalizes it” (140). In an interview with Kayann Short, Viramontes said that she “believes that writing can bring about social change” (5). Literature in particular, she claimed in an essay on writing and political activism, has the capacity to “move peace” (Viramontes, “Writes” 125). That is precisely what she tries to do in *Under the Feet of Jesus*, where through a critique of American capitalism and exploitation she seeks to evoke social change.

Considered from Jamesonian perspective then, *Under the Feet of Jesus* definitely has the “political unconscious” embedded within its narrative. The historical and sociopolitical dimensions of the novel resonate Oboler’s empirical research on ethnicity and marginality. In *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and the Politics of (Re)Presentation in the United States*, Oboler records that in spite of legal rights, Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans have remained largely unacknowledged as “fellow citizens” of Americans. They are denied full citizenship and human rights by the customary practices of exclusion, so that they could be routinely bounced in and out of the “national community” according to the ever-changing political and economic needs of the nation (38). Such attitude in Oboler’s words can be exemplified in their differentiated incorporation into the U.S. economy:

Notwithstanding internal social and racial differentiations, their respective communities have also since been variously affected by the nation’s political needs in war and peace, by its employment practices, and by the racial and immigration policies that reflected the nation’s economic laws of supply and demand. (39)

These lenses can be trained on Viramontes’ novel which brings to the surface such marginalized people and the trajectory of their sufferings caused by insidious forms of racism. Estrella’s step father Perfecto Flores’ thoughts—“[h]e had given this country his all, and in this land that used his bones for kindling, in this land that never once in the thirty years he lived and worked, never once said thank you” (155)—point out the failure of the political and legal system to recognize and protect the very people upon whose invisible labor depends the country’s economic infrastructure. On the contrary, as historian and immigrant rights activist Aviva Chomsky claims in her book *Undocumented: How Immigration Became Illegal*, “[b]y creating a necessarily subordinate workforce without legal status, we maintain a system of legalized inequality” (14). In her view it is the social construction that deprives these workers even from the fundamental

human rights. Verily, *Under the Feet of Jesus* plays an important role in showcasing the decadence of a system that profits from the pains of the marginalized.

If the topic of immigration and attendant civil rights was not lost entirely in the ethnic literature of the 1990s, it was also not forgotten at the start of the twenty-first century, as some of the Latino and South Asian novels of the 2000s continued to make powerful social and political commentary in order to keep the notion of the civil right movements alive. A more recent writing that revisits the legacy of civil rights movement to incite the Latino/a readers to action is Ernesto Quiñónez's *Bodega Dreams*. The novel critiquing the American mainstream, aims to subvert white supremacy at different levels. Because socioeconomic deprivation and persistent racism still excludes the immigrants and other ethnic minority groups from their citizenship rights, Quiñónez's purpose in writing *Bodega Dreams*, as the author of *Latino Literature in American* Bridget Kevane states, was to "galvanize Latino readers to action" (131). Quiñónez's intention, as he states in an interview, was to motivate the people to action: "it is up to ordinary people to bring change because politicians won't" ("Behind the Books" 3). Although U.S. citizens, Puerto Ricans on the mainland have been negatively affected by tremendous economic and social forces, racism, poverty, and violence, all of which have taken a toll on them and have stereotyped them as the bottom dwellers of U.S. society (Kevane 131). Consequently, Quiñónez wanted to write a novel in which he could demonstrate how young people, in particular, could rise above their circumstances and better themselves ("Behind the Books" 4). Although Quiñónez's William Irizarry, or Willie Bodega, a former Young Lord³, is not an ideal character

³ The Young Lords, originally an affiliate of Chicago's Young Lords Organization, were a group of Puerto Rican nationalists that emerged in New York in the mid-1960s. The group's goal was to achieve political and economic self-determination and autonomy of the Puerto Rican community and its organization. (Oboler 51-52)

through whom the change must be brought, he represents how such people are created in the *barrio* because of poverty, racial discrimination, and lack of institutional facilities. Bodega seeks to renew Spanish Harlem through educational means and business opportunities. He funds college tuition for many with an aim to create a class of skilled professionals who can be lawyers, doctors, and professors. Although he chooses the illicit means of trafficking drugs to materialize his dream, his intention is to create an empowered professional class that can raise its voice in protest against the American political and social system that oppresses some of its fellow members.

With Bodega's death and with his young protégé, Chino, taking his place, which is symbolized by the latter being mistaken for Bodega by the new arrivals, Quiñónez seems to be indicating that it is in the hands of educated youths to transform their social condition. Quiñónez ends the novel by instilling hope in the people:

Tomorrow Spanish Harlem would run faster, fly higher, stretch out its arms farther, and one day those dreams would carry its people to new beginnings. [...] The neighborhood might have been down, but it was far from out. Its people far from defeat. They had been bounced all over the place but they were still jamming.

It seemed like a good place to start. (213)

What Quiñónez aims to accomplish through this book is to rekindle amid the Nuyorican community the political fervor and the spirit of the civil rights era to bring about change. While critiquing the mainstream's role in perpetuating the socio-economic oppression, the author tries to inculcate hope in the people and urge them to stir out of their passivity of accepting defeat and mobilize themselves to be economically, socially and politically active. Moreover, by concluding the novel referring to the important and famous figures: "Zapata, Albizu Campos, Sandino, Martí, and Malcolm, along with a million Adelitas," (213) who were part of major

political activism, various revolutions, and the Civil Rights Movement, Quiñónez, in Elías Domínguez Barajas' words, "advocates an anachronistic revival of the ethnic consciousness and solidarity that drove the civil rights movements of 1960s and early 1970s" (8). Domínguez Barajas further adds that although *Bodega Dreams* refuses to endorse a particular way of correcting social inequality, the novel does posit the possibility of "an alternate moral code as a permutation of the idealized political project of the fading civil rights movement" (24).

On the basis of the social perspective captured in *Bodega Dreams* and Jesús Colón's *A Puerto Rican in New York and Other Sketches*, we conclude that in the span of four decades not much has changed with regard to the socio-economic condition of Latinos in the United States. *A Puerto Rican in New York and Other Sketches*, published during the radical period of the early 1960s, portrays the victimization and alienation the author had to go through when he arrived in New York. By chronicling the events of his life, Colón actually constructs a picture of the seamy sordid life of Latinos, their deprivation and oppression by the mainstream. Despite the fact that Puerto Ricans are American citizens, and have been since 1917 and passage of the Jones Act, and the fact that they have lived on the mainland for over a century and that they have participated in every major war since World War II, they have remained marginal to the dominant culture. They have been treated not only as second-class citizens but also as foreign immigrants, as they have never been recognized as a vital component of the American social fabric. *Bodega Dreams*, published in 2000 also illustrates similar picture of the lives of Latinos living in the *barrios*. Over the span of thirty nine years, a lot has changed, no doubt, but the lot of the Latinos has not changed much. Spanish Harlem is still there, as is the lack of opportunities to better one's self, economic exploitation and political marginalization. Fifty years have passed since the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Chicano Movement; though the demands have been

granted formally, the narratives give testimony to the fact that in practice the rights have yet to be implemented and fully enjoyed by all members of the nation regardless of their color, ethnicity or religious beliefs.

Religion, in the recent years, has come to the forefront as a new agency to carry out oppression not only in the U.S. but all over the world. Because of their religious beliefs, post 9/11 Muslims have become easy targets of suspicion and arrest. This era brought an end to the citizenship and constitutional rights of the American Muslims as they began to be perceived as potential terrorists. Many contemporary South Asian American writers, such as Shaila Abdullah with her book *Saffron Dreams* or Mohsin Hamid with his *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, play a key role in counteracting such misconception by highlighting the mistreatment of Muslims who, being subject to policing and hyper surveillance, lead a life of constant fear. Taking as their critical lens the post 9/11 condition in the U.S., these writers engage in portraying the abrupt turn that the lives of the U.S. Muslims take in the wake of anti-Muslim bigotry. Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, written in the form of traditional bildungsroman, is one such novel that lays bare the age old mechanics of racial profiling because of one's religion and debunks the myth of tolerance that the U.S. promotes about itself by bringing to surface the old and the new forms of curtailing constitutional rights. Due to his country of origin and his religious beliefs, the narrator and the central character of the novel Changez sees his position dramatically change from that of an indispensable employee of the prestigious company that he works for to a subject of suspicion and a prospective fundamentalist. Although Changez is a Muslim, in the process of his Americanization, he drifts far away from his religion; his penchant adherence to alcohol consumption and his "wholehearted support" (23) of the practice of topless sunbathing hardly

associate him to the basic principles of a practicing Muslim; he is anything but a prototypical Islamic fundamentalist who is a staunch follower of the fundamentals of Islam.

Changez comes to the U.S. as a student and within a short period of time as a Princeton graduate earns a position at one of the most competitive and sought after companies, Underwood Samson & Company. He becomes the embodiment of American Dream who has climbed the ladder of success by dint of merit and hard work. Changez's accomplishments made him feel indomitable, as he says, "I felt bathed in a warm sense of accomplishment. Nothing troubled me; I was a young New Yorker with the city at my feet" (45). But with the twin tower attack in September 11, 2001, everything changes instantaneously for Changez as he falls victim to racial profiling because of his religion and country of origin. On his way back to the U.S. from Manila, where the Underwood members had gone on business trip, Changez experiences the first instance of being under suspicion. At the airport, he is overcome with humiliation and insult as he is "escorted by armed guards into a room where [he] [is] made to strip down to [his] boxer shorts"; furthermore, his entrance into the aircraft "elicited looks of concern" from his fellow passengers (74). Throughout his journey, the rigorous inspection and checking constantly made him feel like a guilty person. Later on, his facial beard, which he decides to grow for no "precise motivation," problematizes his identity in an already anti-Muslim hatred filled atmosphere, and he begins to ponder if he grew it "perhaps, [as] a form of protest on [his] part, a symbol of [his] identity, or perhaps [he] sought to remind [him]self of the reality [he] had just left behind" (130). His Pakistani origin and beard redefine him as terrorist despite his complete assimilation into a modern American and his excellent performance in his work place, and gradually he is labeled as an Islamist extremist by the fear mongering people who eye him with suspicions: "More than once, traveling on the subway—where I had always had the feeling of seamlessly blending in—I

was subjected to verbal abuse by complete strangers, and at Underwood Samson I seemed to become overnight a subject of whispers and stares” (130).

Changez’s fictional situation very aptly reflects what Oboler claims about ethnic labels in our actual society and era: “Ethnic labeling is today being used to reinforce the reliance on the fear and distrust which redefine all third-world immigrants in the U.S. context as potential ‘foreign terrorist’” (“Citizenship and Belonging” 119). Hamid in the novel gives account of the upsurge of racial profiling that led to the persecution of many innocent American Muslims; they not only suffered physical assault but were also victimized in the business world where many American Muslims faced “rescinded job offers and groundless dismissals” (120). The stories of attacks on Muslims, as well on those who might vaguely resemble a Muslim or an Arab, based on sheer fear and suspicion reinforces the fact that the racially charged atmosphere that prevailed in the post 9/11 era is actually the manifestation of something that has been lying dormant amid the mainstream people. Fear is capitalized as a means to target and torture the ‘Other’. Oboler has very pertinently brought out how racism in today’s world is predominantly governed by fear:

Indeed, racism in the US context cannot be relegated to the distant past when legal segregation, overt bigotry and lynching were common. Instead, today’s racism is fed by fear and the never-ending possibilities created not only by the blatant distortions ... but also by the “Maybes,” and the “What ifs” inherent in a “national security” doctrine intent on sowing distrust, thereby effectively sabotaging the possibility of creating a community of equals, and its modern synonym, a community of citizens. (“Citizenship and Belonging” 116)

The 9/11 incident merely reignites the flames of hatred and fear of the Other that was already there in the mainstream population. Prevalence of anti-Muslim sentiments is rather a resurgence of the century old history of policing and incarceration as way of having control over those who deviate from the established definition of normativity; anything that is different—skin color, national origin, or religious belief—from what is accepted as normal is to be brought under

control or eradicated. Being a victim of such mentality, Changez is ultimately forced to leave the country. His decision to leave the U.S. and his transformation later on—although Hamid does not crystalize whether Changez does indeed become a radical fundamentalist or not—verily underscore an islamophobic racism in the U.S. that tends to identify all Muslims as potential terrorists. Hamid, through the use of monologue delivered from the viewpoint of the Other, humorously and cynically captures the social reality of the era's resurgence of hatred. Moreover, by leaving the novel open ended, he stirs the readers' critical thinking and calls for discussion and change. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, no doubt, is an appropriate example of a text that besides entertaining the readers with an enticing storyline, also informs them of the vices of American society by illustrating a realistic picture of the socio-political realities of the time.

To solidify my claim that immigrant literary works are not at all devoid of socio-political concerns, but do counteract the unequal power structure embedded in society, I turn to the observations made by Ramón Saldívar in his seminal work *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference*. Saldívar articulates that Chicano narratives are works of ideologies that are counterhegemonic and revolutionary. He further asserts that Chicano narratives aid in the construction of socially symbolic acts of resistance to oppressive class, race, and gender structures within contemporary culture. Saldívar's assertion reinforces the connection between literature and society that purports that the ideological world of a society, more often than not, is manifested in that society's literary production in a given time. "[t]he social world" represented in the writings of Chicano men and women, in Saldívar's view "is an emphatically political one" (4). He further asserts that for Chicano/a writers, to write, "is preeminently a political act seeking to fulfill the potentialities of contemporary life. It is also, ultimately, an attempt to recall the originary myths of life on the borders of power in order to fashion triumphantly a new,

heterogeneous American consciousness, within the dialects of difference” (218). He further argues that Chicano literature not only reflects the ideology or social reality but also is capable of producing concrete effects in the world. His analysis and observation, though centered on Chicano writers, is applicable to a great extent to all immigrant writers who aim to challenge the ideologies of oppression of the Anglo-American culture through their writings.

Aligning with Jameson, Saldívar too believes that politics and art do not develop in isolation, rather they are interrelated (24). He further emphasizes that with the Chicano social activism in the 1960s, narratives have rooted themselves in the concrete social interests of historical and contemporary events (24). Contemporary immigrant literature, by positioning itself against the overt and covert components of social power, to borrow Saldívar’s assertion regarding Chicano/a writers, is attempting to remedy the exclusion and marginalization of immigrants by depicting their own bicultural experience in the context of the broad historical events (24). And by adopting the dialectics of difference—“the narrative strategy for demystifying the relations between minority cultures and the dominant culture,” (Saldívar 5)—the authors of this literary corpus are re-mapping the social and literary territory for struggle to achieve these new political goals. Indeed, the texts produced by post-1960s writers are symbolic responses to present day events. Seen from Saldívar and Jameson’s theoretical perspectives, contemporary immigrant novels then, are historically and politically oriented though many a novel may repress the political into the unconscious. Jameson’s hermeneutics of interpreting literary works, in particular, work appropriately to identify the political and ideological struggles and resistance represented in the narratives of immigrant and ethnic literature. These discussions should clarify any doubts regarding the function of immigrant literature as a means of informing the readers of the political and historical context.

Contemporary Immigrant Literature, neither Apolitical nor a Commodification of Immigrant Experience

As I trace the political engagement of some contemporary immigrant novels, I cannot sideline the allegation made against this particular genre in the later part of the twentieth century. A number of critics, scholars, and academicians have accused the writers of immigrant novels of losing the political fervor of the civil rights era and giving way to the marketability and popularity of their work for prestige and economic success. Critics proclaim that ethnic and immigrant literature has become a commodity for the consumption of cultural fetishists. That is, authors have surrendered themselves to the current trend of writing about ethnic experiences or having protagonists belonging to different minority groups to capture the attention of readers and reach, primarily, economic—instead of political—rewards by doing so. Of the critics who think contemporary Latino/a literature has become “apolitical” and “assimilationist,” two prominent critics are Lisa Sánchez González and Juan Flores. Sánchez González accuses post-Sixties Latino/a literature of rejecting the political and social concerns and aligning with the mainstream and producing works that cater to the market demand (135). In a similar tone, Flores also asserts that “what is new about the recent Latino writing, and goes to inform it as a marketing category, is that it seeks to be apolitical” (174). In regard to South Asian American writings, Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth in their book chapter “South Asian American Literature: ‘Off the Turnpike’ of Asian America,” mention that South Asian American writers often give way to the commodification of ethnicity in order to garner attention for their work. However, aligning with Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez, I refute that contemporary immigrant literature is apolitical and assimilationist. Dalleo and Machado Sáez in their book *The Latino/a Canon and the Emergence of Post-Sixties Literature*, dispute the fact that contemporary literary

work, particularly Latino/a writing, is not living up to the political demands of the Civil Rights generation and insist that “rather than turning away from politics, contemporary Latino/a writers are renewing that political tradition by engaging with the triumphs and defeats of the past, formulating political projects that will mark [their] future horizons in substantial and creative ways” (7).

While I do not totally negate the fact that cultural works produced by ethnic minorities do run the risk of being capitalized and commodified in today’s marketplace, I see evidence that these writers have the power to resist and in many cases they do resist the commercialization of their literary products. Meena Alexander has astutely commented on writer’s autonomy to resist such attempts. In her view,

This new emerging art, without even knowing what we are buying in and are bought in, consists of images magnified, bartered in the high places of capitalist chic [...] one of the things that is incumbent upon us as artists is to create works which, even as they take this phase within the social world, are in some way recalcitrant to it. (“Asian American Aesthetics” 26-7)

One way contemporary writers counteract mainstream’s attempt of domestication and commodification, as Ellen Marie McCracken points out, is by deploying “certain textual strategies” (12). These textual strategies include, but are certainly not limited to, multiple narrative voices, double coded language, and strategic use of exoticism that subvert or uncover the unequal power relation. McCracken in her book *New Latina Narrative: The Feminine Space of Postmodern Ethnicity* points out how “[t]he creation of ‘minority commodities’” attempts to reabsorb writers and texts into mainstream ideology as desirable elements of postmodernity that can be purchased and, to some degree, possessed (12). According to her, commodification is not the necessary site of a monolithic reification only; rather, the literary commodity is often a

contested space wherein struggles for closure, and resistance to that closure, are frequently underway (12).

Writers of immigrant narratives, instead of entirely eluding the mainstream's attempt of commodification, take advantage of such attempt for wider readership. But in no way should this attempt be misunderstood as being politically and socially disengaged. Instead, the authors make use of the narratives style and structure to make powerful comment. In Antonia Domínguez Miguela's words, the writers take advantage of mainstreaming to confront cultural and political issues in a subtle and ambiguous terrain. She further asserts that these texts reveal themselves as powerful instruments of defamiliarization and deconstruction of preconceived ideas about various groups and as a harsh critique of institutions that perpetuate such beliefs. Indeed McCracken has rightly claimed that "these cultural forms enjoy 'relative autonomy': they are doubly encoded and therefore neither completely controlled by[,] nor completely autonomous from[,] hegemonic institutions" (13). These texts do retain the political message but do so in a subversive way by using various writing styles and techniques such as reverse chronological narration (as seen in *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*), shifting narrative perspective (as seen in *Manhattan Music*), double coded messages (as in *When I Was Puerto Rican*), replacing a single dominant narrative voice that gives a univocal attitude to the work with multiple narrative voices (as seen in *Dreaming in Cuban* and *Love Marriage*), or experimenting with structure by defying uniformity of narration by using reverse and discontinuous perspective (as in *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*), disjointed narration (as seen in *Love Marriage*), as well as making use of various tropes and symbols in their writing.

Quiñónez's stylistic choices in *Bodega Dreams* exemplify how instead of foregrounding the cultural and political issues in their writings, the post-sixties writers take advantage of the marketability of their works and simultaneously subvert and criticize the white hegemony by masterfully using, among many other factors, chapter titles in a symbolic way. In order to understand the significance of enumerating his novel's chapters as boxing rounds, the issue of *Bodega Dreams* as a non-subversive text must first be established, and June Dwyer's reading of the novel serves this purpose. In her discussion of *Bodega Dreams* in the article, "When Willie Met Gatsby: The Critical Implications of Ernesto Quiñónez's *Bodega Dreams*," Dwyer claims that Quiñónez altered the ending of the novel to satisfy the demands of the editor. Although Quiñónez does not clarify what changes he had made in the novel, the very fact that he made alterations under the editorial influence may lend credence to the claim that contemporary ethnic minority writers commodify their works in order to satisfy consumer sensibilities and tastes, which further the notion that contemporary ethnic literature may be seen as "apolitical" and can actively foreground "universal" messages in order to make it attractive to mainstream consumers. Dwyer actually proffers the claim in *Bodega Dreams* that the political "anxiety and the anger, as well as the metaphors of struggle, have receded" (168) and that Quiñónez is not especially concerned with undermining dominant social structures, so presumably his "intent does not seem subversive" (168). Sean Moiles, however, argues that if Quiñónez's project is not subversive, one wonders why chapters in *Bodega Dreams* are indeed titled after boxing rounds (120). The subtitles of each chapter—Round 1, Round 2, and so on with the last chapter being subtitled "Knockout"—are crucial in understanding the intention of author. By using such chapter titles, Quiñónez creates a parallel between the narration and a boxing match, emphasizing the struggle and difficulty that young Puerto Ricans face when trying to emerge

successfully from their environment, when trying to achieve a better level of social awareness, effectiveness, and improved social standing (Kevane 134). A central question that Quiñónez wanted to address in his novel reveals his own social consciousness and obsessions: “Why is it that we keep failing the residents of inner city ghettos? [...] Someone has to change things” (“Behind the Books” 3). But while critics like Juan Flores and Lisa Sánchez González blame such ghetto fiction for its “commercialization” (Dalleo and Machado Sáez 13), Dalleo and Machado Sáez credit *Bodega Dreams* as being an apt example of how post-Sixties generations deconstruct the equation of ghetto fiction with economic pandering as the proper discourse for a critical and resistant political project (12-13). The novel is now, in Dalleo and Machado Sáez’s view, an even more direct engagement with the inheritance of the Civil Rights generation, even as it points to the pleasures of the market (13).

While Quiñónez experiments with the structure and the chapter titles of the novel as a way to express discontentment, South Asian American writer V.V. Ganeshanathan uses the theme of marriage and the terrorist trope to comment on the isolationist attitude of the dominant group. Although the title *Love Marriage: A Novel* and the opening lines, “[i]n this globe-scattered Sri Lankan family, we speak only of two kinds of marriage. The first is the Arranged Marriage. The second is the Love Marriage” (3) of Ganeshanathan’s debut novel suggest that the sole focus of the book will be on marriages, in actuality, entwined with the family saga is the exploration of Sri Lankan civil war and immigrant experience of the Sri Lankan Tamils who have immigrated to different parts of the world. The novel, told from different perspectives but mostly from the perspective of the central character Yalini, among other issues, sheds light on the condition of immigrants in the adopted land whether that is the U.S. or Canada or England. Although Yalini is an American by birth and has never been to Sri Lanka, she is troubled by the

same feeling of exclusion and alienation that her parents felt years ago when they came to the U.S.:

I grew up and out of my parents' house. I grew up and went to a university far away from them. At this school my work consumed me, because that was what I wanted. I mired myself in it [...]

There, Away, I became more like them than ever before, because no matter how American I was, I was also the only Sri Lankan. I was alone as my mother had been, stepping onto her first escalator in New York. As alone as my father had been inside the X-ray machine, before meeting my mother. (21)

Due to her stigma of being the Other, she fails to garner the recognition of full membership.

Even at the university, she feels “lonelier” (22) amid the other students. Her psychic crisis at being avoided and thus leading a lonely life is expressed through the disjointed and fragmented narrative style. Ganeshanathan writes the novel in the vignette form, where very often a chapter consists of a page or even half a page. The entire novel written in 133 chapters is divided into nine parts, and the first section of the novel is preceded by a 56 page introduction of the major characters and events that initiate the storytelling. The author uses the disjunctive structure to reverberate the disjunctive journey of the immigrants, which are made more tortuous by the narrow-mindedness of a society that continues to marginalize people based on skin color and land of origin. The series of fragmented narratives is analogous to the fragmented immigrant experience in the U.S. Ganeshanathan in this novel transcends the borders of the U.S. and provides the readers a glimpse of experiences of Sri Lankan Tamil immigrants in other parts of the world to show how immigrants all over the world face the same kind of racial discrimination and ostracizing. Yalini's uncle, Kumaran in retrospection of his days in the U.K., tells Yalini that in the U.K. his Otherness has made him easy prey to contempt and hatred: “Very soon I realized that I had become a coloured [*sic*] person. Worse than being a Tamil in Sri Lanka, in some ways, because they could pick me out as different on the street” (210).

However, Ganeshanathan's disapproval of the mainstream's exclusionary attitude is not confined within her use of the fragmented vignette form only. Her conspicuous attack on the adopted country's attitude towards its immigrant members is also expressed through her use of the "terrorist" trope (Watkins 204). By juxtaposing Yalini's ostracizing with that of Kumaran's and his daughter Janani's, the author voices the concern regarding the immigrants' position in the host land. Though they saw themselves as fighting to establish their rights, as members of the LTTE⁴, Kumaran and Janani are considered terrorists and therefore detested and shunned by the Sri Lankan government. Both of them are liminal and alienated subjects, which as David Putner observes, is also often the fate of immigrants (Watkins 204):

In encountering the terrorist we are often taken to the limit of understanding, to the end of inscription: nothing but death is written on this body, and death is not interpretable [...]. In the fate of the immigrants, we see [also] the limitations of understanding, or of being understood; the inescapability of stereotyping and prejudice; the impossibility of ever being fully "at home." (qtd. in Watkins 205)

In their liminality and subordinate subjectivity then, there is similarity between the immigrant Yalini and her terrorist Uncle and cousin. Kumaran's pathetic condition and his ultimate death in a foreign country points out to Yalini the Sri Lankan government's inability to understand its insurgents. As she ponders the relationship of the members of LTTE and the government, "governments call men terrorists to erase their reason, to make them crazy. Some of them are, and some are not" (272), she is reminded of her relationship with her adopted land where no matter how much she wants to belong, she is always considered an outsider and intruder. Her

⁴ The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam was a Tamil organization that raised a protest for a separate nation for Tamils in the North of Sri Lanka. The organization, based in northeastern Sri Lanka, however, was considered as terrorist organization by the Sri Lankan government as well as most of the world leaders.

dejected realization very aptly brings out her agony at not being accepted or understood by the people of the country she has right to by birth.

Writers of immigrant narratives, as Katie Daily-Bruckner writes in her article “Reimagining Genre in the Contemporary Immigration Novel,” “do not simply write ‘contemporary’ fiction: rather, they craft what must be called ‘revisionary’ narratives that look back at America’s recent and distant past, attempting to revisit both ‘literary’ and political history simultaneously” (219). Daily-Bruckner’s claim echoes Jameson and Saldivar’s theoretical perspective regarding writers’ preoccupation with documenting the social, political and historical context of the society, which oftentimes remain cloaked underneath the compelling stories. “The political unconscious” of a text, therefore, is an effective theoretical framework for understanding the function of immigrant literature. Indeed this branch of literature functions both aesthetically and ideologically in the sense that it not only provides readers pleasure but through the fictional recreation of the lived experiences of immigrants also brings them face to face with the ills of the society in hopes of ushering change. By employing various narrative techniques and forms, such as magical realism (as deployed by Diaz), vignettes (as used by Ganeshanathan and Cisneros and many others), traditional bildungsroman form (as used by Sidhwa) or simply adopting social realism (as used by Hamid), these authors not only revisit the overused classical tropes of arrival to the new world, the struggle of settlement, prefiguration of cultural and national identity, but also manage to forcefully critique the inhospitable social and political climate of the adopted land. The works may be ostensibly apolitical, but they do obliquely comment on the discrimination and cast light on the surreptitious workings of the politics of power by experimenting with styles of writing and developing various narrative forms. Indeed

Jameson's assertion that the form along with the content or substance of a text relate to the socio-economic and historical events finds validity in the writings of the immigrant experience.

Therefore, these writers are in no way politically ambivalent or politically aversive, rather they manifest their political and ideological stances by showing resistance to the issues of social injustices by utilizing various strategies of narration and stylistic devices thereby resisting the closure of commodification. In the post-Sixties era, the writers have been rethinking ways of expressing resistance to the institutionalized discrimination and racism that would not impact the readership of their literary works. Dalleo and Machado Sáez have rightly pointed out that the relationship between literature and the public sphere is being redefined in the light of post-Sixties realities—the market's centrality in the creation, dissemination, and reception of virtually all contemporary cultural texts (7). Instead of opposing market success that shuns oppositional politics, contemporary ethnic and immigrant writers “imagine[s] creative ways to rethink the relationship between a politics of social justice and market popularity [...]” (3). *Bodega Dreams* and *Love Marriage* are just two examples of how writers far from being apolitical and assimilationist in form and subject, redefine and renegotiate forms and themes that emanate power struggle and evoke resistance to hegemony.

Immigrant Literature and Nostalgia

The above discussions so far has demonstrated that post-60s immigrant literature is leaning neither to being apolitical nor to being assimilationist; rather the corpora of South Asian American and Latino/a American literary works emphasize the writers' creative and politically progressive potential. In the narrativization of the immigrant experience, among the various forms and tropes that the writers use, nostalgia occupies a significant position. Nostalgia as a

trope goes beyond illustrating the longing for past home or land and highlights the immigrant protagonists' subordinate position in relation to the super-ordinate and the subsequent alienation. By forging together the past and present spatio-temporal ontologies, nostalgia helps in creating new identity and perspective that go in shaping the future. John J. Su asserts that nostalgia has provided means of expressing resistance for individuals who otherwise lacked the power to change their circumstances more directly. Seen from this viewpoint, nostalgia is then a means of expressing the immigrant protagonists' resentment at the lack of economic and political power and their inability to usher change in their stagnant condition. Just as nostalgia, by connecting the past and present, helps immigrants in building a solid future, in a similar way, the contemporary literary texts, by looking backward, are re-mapping the social and literary territory. The longing for a past when the individual was free from subjection and the desire to reconnect to the ancestral land depicted in so many immigrant novels can be read as an insurgent desire for acceptance and equality in the host country. John J. Su has very aptly pointed out, "[w]hether these authors embrace or reject the nostalgia surrounding them, they all consciously exploit nostalgia's tendency to interweave imagination, longing, and memory in their efforts to envision resolutions to the social dilemmas of fragmentation and displacement described in their novels"

(3). Nostalgia for these writers is not mere romantic fancy or sentimentality, instead it is a crucial means they use to narrate the socioeconomic and political disempowerment. The trope of nostalgia becomes a rhetorical aspect of the political reality endorsed by the authors in their works. As a persistent and prevalent feature of immigrant novels, the nostalgic paradigm is thus of particular importance because of its function of shedding light on the issues of discrimination, segregation and political disenfranchisement.

Relevance of Immigrant Literature in the Twenty-First Century U.S.

At the present moment when a large number of U.S. immigrants face the fear of deportation and are subject to purposeful Othering, the importance of immigrant novels has never been felt more acutely. There is no doubt that a lot has changed in the perspectives of the hegemonic group after the Civil Right Movement and the Chicano Movement, yet many U.S. immigrants—particularly those who are not easily integrated into the American identity by virtue of their race or place of origin—still have to overcome discrimination and subjugation in numerous ways. Some may argue that racial oppression is a matter of the past in the U.S. because many immigrants have climbed the socio-economic ladder, but the fact that the literary works on immigrant experience time and again have narrations of oppression and exploitation explicitly or implicitly woven into the overarching narratives testifies that in reality oppression still exists though, in a different form. Oboler has rightly said that,

We can therefore affirm with some confidence both that racism in the United States is quite secure for some time to come; and that racial discrimination, by way of ethnicity, continues to ensure-and at this point to exacerbate the fragmentation of the national community; eroding the effective meaning of citizenship, with its attendant rights and responsibilities in this country. (“Citizenship and Belonging” 120)

Exclusion from the privileges of citizenship and barring one from the center of power is definitely means of restraining the progress and prolonging the subjugation of the new immigrants as well as the second and third generation of descendants who have been living in the U.S.A. for decades and are legal citizens but ironically do not have access to full citizenship rights. Despite contributing in the overall development of the country they are given the status of second class citizen, nullifying their desire to be recognized as an “American” in entirety. As members of historically oppressed groups, Latino/a American and South Asian American writers

critique the exclusionary and authoritarian attitude of the dominant culture through their writings. They use their writings as a mouthpiece to call for social justice and plea for accessibility and availability of the civil rights that immigrants and other ethnic groups are, in practice, denied. As an integrative tool, this genre calls for recognition and integration into socio-economic and political arenas.

Importance of Immigrant Literature in a Global Context

Placing them in a global context, contemporary immigrant novels, which are textual representation of reality, enhance current understanding of the plights of immigrants and other minority groups and propel the readers towards tolerance and compassion. This body of fiction also plays a noteworthy role in reflecting the complexities of living with stigmatization, enforced acculturation, and the negotiation of belongingness and identities. Each one of the stories discussed above gives voice to the problems and predicaments of the immigrant characters on an emotional level which goes to arouse empathy and sensibility in the readers, who otherwise would remain oblivious of the sufferings and the mistreatment of immigrants. They can, if not to a great extent but to some degree, get a sense of how it feels to leave home and come to settle in foreign country. I am not advocating that reading these novels will convert the readers into humanitarian agents, but the narratives will surely give the readers greater insights into the hardships of immigrants and, to some extent, ethnic minorities in general. Furthermore, immigrant novels broaden the prejudiced and parochial mindset of the mainstream and encourage readers to view the “Other” not as someone to be feared or abhorred; instead, by allowing for change in the perspective of the readers, the novels lead them to realize that despite the differences in appearance, culture or ideologies, immigrants, as humans beings, deserve to be

treated equally, and that their uniqueness does not in itself entail a potential threat. Most importantly, immigrant literature underlines the importance of recognizing and respecting difference—especially when such difference is not in itself pernicious to the hegemonic other—thereby inspiring the acceptance of different worldview and promoting tolerance and social awareness among the people.

Concurrently, by introducing to the readers a variety of cultures from all over the world, this genre influences the readers' views regarding various cultures of the world. Books like *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *Love Marriage* not only transfer the readers to diverse geographical locations but also engage them in an inquiry of other cultures and history, thereby enhancing their understanding of mobility and displacement as well as providing them insights into the factors that initiate migration. These perceptions, I believe, enhance mutual understanding and respect among the representatives of divergent cultures. Although globalization has opened up doors for trade and economic benefits for many people, for immigrants it has, in Arjun Appadurai's words, added more anxieties to their already burdened existence. Appadurai asserts that “[i]n the United States and in the ten or so most wealthy countries of the world, globalization is certainly a positive buzzword for corporate elites and their political allies. But for migrants, people of color, and other marginals [...] it is a source of worry of about inclusion, jobs, and deeper marginalization” (35). These immigrants and minorities, in Appadurai's words, are “flash point for a series of uncertainties” because they “create uncertainties about national self and national citizenship because of their mixed status. Their legally ambiguous status puts pressures on constitutions and legal orders. Their movements threaten policing of borders [...]” (44). Above all, since almost all ideas of nation and peoplehood rely on some idea of ethnic purity or singularity and the suppression of the memories

of plurality, ethnic minorities blur the boundaries of national peoplehood, which translate into a lack of tolerance of any sort of collective strangers (Appadurai 44-45). Under such circumstance, immigrant literature is instrumental in dismantling the image of nation-state as a normative cultural community and provoking the revision of the concepts of nationality and belongingness that would generate a more inclusive understanding.

The works of Díaz, Alvarez, García, Hamid, Ganeshanathan, Naqvi or the works of other writers writing from different national boundaries, problematize and challenge the obsession with racial purity and the idea of building a nation-state based on a singular ethnicity. Standing at the 21st century, with the fluidity of borders and the rise of transnational flows of people due to the political unrest all over the world, to adhere to the idea of national purity is to run the risk of falling into the trap of absolutism and parochial view of ethnic belonging. Immigrant novels, by challenging a variety of negative agents—stereotypical views concerning certain nations and religion, or the fear of losing ethnic purity—that impede cultural and national integration, resist the idea of national purity and separatism and advocate for multiethnic and multicultural national identities. This genre, by counteracting the dominant narrative of national belonging, plays a major role in bridging the gap among different nations and cultures and opening up space for cultural engagement. Failure to bridge cultural divides is perhaps what is behind the escalation of hatred and racial violence across the globe.

The relevance of what immigrant literature has to offer is apparent in light of a global context wherein the disparities and injustices that the ethnic minority groups fought against in the sixties and seventies stubbornly persist. In fact, the upsurge in racial tension, the prevalence of rhetoric of hatred, and the rise of intolerance in the recent years have revived the exigency of immigrant literature. Contemporary immigrant literature through overt or covert criticism aims to

systematically uncover the underlying structures of the dominant culture that work in perpetuating the oppression of the ethnic minority class all over the world. Hence, by producing an array of work often characterized by nostalgia, immigrant literature serves as a platform of expression as well as a critique of racial oppression and cultural tension, and calls for rebellion or resistance in hope of reformation and reconstruction.

Epilogue

While recent discourses on nostalgia are abundant, the exclusive aim of this research has been neither to provide a historical overview of those discourses nor to provide an all-encompassing understanding of the various types of nostalgia. Instead, one central aim of this dissertation has been to challenge those critics who have downplayed nostalgia as “a colored memory” (Dyson 117), “the abdication of memory,” or a way of looking at the past cut off from the present; indeed, I have tried to advocate that immigrant nostalgia is none of these and certainly not a “romance with one’s own fantasy” (Boym xiii). Instead of being the exclusive product of emotional predisposition or self-indulgence, immigrants’ nostalgia has a socio-political underpinning that is very much entwined with the present. Drawing upon some of the important works of South Asian and Latino/a American writers from 1960 to the present, and building on the verisimilitude of the narratives examined, I have presented a framework for interpreting the dynamics that trigger nostalgia in the immigrant protagonists of those literary works. Analyzing their present condition in the adopted land, I have revealed that their alienation—caused by the racialized exclusion of immigrants from enfranchisement in the economic, political and cultural spheres of their adopted country—provokes a longing for the past in the immigrant protagonists. In conjunction, I attest that the theme of nostalgia still persists in immigrant literary narratives because it is linked to the socio-cultural and socio-political concerns faced by the immigrant characters, thereby refuting those who believe that nostalgia is a common feature of immigrant literature generated merely for commercial purposes and subject to conventional representations of immigrant experience.

Immigrant social integration is fundamentally about acquiring a sense of belonging and of being actively accepted as a member of society. As a process, immigrant social integration depends largely on the host society's attitude towards immigrants. Although the declaration of the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution: "All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the States wherein they reside," gives the immigrants the status of citizens, the degree to which many immigrants have been able to reap the benefits of true citizenship still remains in question. The social reality of the U.S. speaks a different language—the many forms of manipulation and marginalization of the immigrant protagonists indicate that immigrants are still not truly considered citizens of the U.S. and are not given entrance into the imagined community of the adopted land. From the moment immigrants step on the land of their dreams, America, they dive into a perennial struggle to survive amid hostile atmosphere while also adjusting to the new environment, learning the language, and embracing the country as their own. Successful immigration to the new country does not mean accommodation only; it also means being able to integrate into the country's social, political, and cultural fabric. The literary works examined in this dissertation reveal that when an exclusionary attitude toward immigrants is adopted, in overt or covert ways, by those in the mainstream of the host society, the process of integration is obstructed, leading immigrants to experience an intense intransigent nostalgia for the lost home.

While discussing the factors that engender nostalgia, Stuart Tannock alleges that a person can be nostalgic for various reasons; it could be to escape or critique the present dissatisfied condition, or it could be to overcome the loss of identity that is felt in the host country. In his words, by "[i]nvolving the past, the nostalgic subject may be involved in escaping or evading, in critiquing, or in mobilizing to overcome the present experience of loss of identity, lack of

agency, or absence of community” (454). Seen from this perspective, it can be said that the present disenfranchised condition, limited agency, and fragmented existence are the reasons the immigrant archetypes in the works considered develop nostalgia for their past home. The alienated feeling surges up in them when the mainstream refuses to include them as part of the national discourse. Because the larger society views immigrants as outsiders, immigrants remain marginal members of the community, and they continually seek an end to their liminal status by revisiting the past.

The previous chapters trace the idea of immigrant nostalgia as a longing for the past homeland. In the first chapter, I discussed immigrant nostalgia as an individual phenomenon rooted in persistent alienation suffered in the adopted land. In that chapter, through extensive discussion of the selected primary texts, I demonstrated how the immigrant protagonists are victimized in multifarious ways. In the literary works considered within the particular scope of this study, discrimination and inequalities in social, economic and political arenas make immigrant protagonists long for their past homeland, not because they expect economic or political security there but because the homeland was thought of as a haven of happiness and belongingness.

The second chapter addressed the cultural pressure that often leads the protagonists to transculturation—the process whereby they not only give up their own cultural traits but also acquire the traits of the hegemonic culture to be accepted in the host society. Anxiety and tension that result from this process of transculturation also trigger nostalgia in individuals. They grapple with their individuality and their new identity to survive in the host county. But for many, this transculturation is not an easy process. While some do assimilate quickly, for others this assimilation is not so easy since they continue nurturing their native culture and refuse to—or

simply cannot—step into the process of change. These characters live in the past through the nostalgic reminiscence of their homeland while others go back to the country of origin physically, which definitely is a part of the nostalgic impulse.

But as discussed in the third chapter, none of the protagonists stays behind in their native land because they were not, in truth, nostalgic of the native land; rather, their nostalgia is a longing for the past or discontinued experience. This realization helps them renew their connection with the adopted land and assist in reconstructing an identity that is more stable and confident of their position in the U.S. Nostalgia does not necessarily provide any concrete solution, but it does enable the protagonists to identify the places of discrimination in the adopted land and to try to find means of adjustment. The memories of her past, in *Manhattan Music*, for example, do not offer Sandhya an image of a happy and ideal past; however, her nostalgia not only channelizes in her the strength to face the conflicts but also help her to be more adamant in claiming her position in the United States. Chapter three showed how nostalgia and the journey back home initiated in the protagonists the need of self-reformulation in the host country. By going back to the past homeland, they rediscover their former self and their position in their native land and make sense of their present.

In the fourth chapter, along with highlighting the functions of immigrant literature as a genre, I counteracted the allegation that contemporary immigrant literature has become apolitical and a commodification of immigrant experiences by demonstrating the political preoccupation of this branch of literature. Through extensive discussion of various texts, I attested as to how far from being apolitical contemporary writers of immigrant narratives are. Such authors make overt and covert commentary on the racialized discrimination prevalent in society by employing various narrative forms and tropes, of which nostalgia is of great significance. Nostalgia, hence,

becomes a medium through which the writers not only showcase the hegemonic group's discriminatory attitude, but also give expression to the contradictions, suppressed feeling of alienation, and the resolution of the immigrant protagonists. The fourth chapter thus, by centering its discussion on the functions of immigrant novels in the twenty-first century globalized world, tries to take a broader critical approach in drawing a connection between the disenfranchisement of immigrants and their tendency toward nostalgia.

As explained in that final chapter, the feeling of nostalgia, finally, is neither limited to people of any particular country or nationality, nor does it affect only the people who have experienced immigration to countries like the U.S. In fact, nostalgia is experienced to some degree by all people who are displaced from their native land. Just as diaspora and immigration is a common phenomenon in the global era, similarly, the feeling of nostalgia is a global phenomenon that affects all those who have left their native land and have immigrated to a different country, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, for economic benefits or to escape persecution or political rage. It is not just in the U.S. that immigrants suffer; immigrants suffer worldwide. Although every immigrant experience is unique and is shaped by the cultural and socio-political milieu of the country, there are certain cords of similarities that bind all immigrants together. Despite their respective diversity—in terms of personal experience, social and political history, place and national origin, and personal identity—the nature of their status as immigrants brings all immigrants in the globe together as a greater community whose members share not only the experience of suppression and alienation in the adopted land but also their struggle to integrate in all facets of life. To the degree that their encounter with racial hatred and cultural imperialism is an aspect of their immigrant experience, the intensity of their nostalgia increases. Moreover, that such factors as racism and intolerance of cultural diversity

extend across private and public spaces in most global immigration scenarios speaks to the idea that nostalgia is a shared experience for immigrants across the world. Thus, as a global phenomenon, nostalgia occupies a prominent position in the narratives of immigrant experience.

My dissertation thus establishes a new way of seeing nostalgia as both a way to cope with, and an outcome of, the disappointment and frustration of immigrants with their present lives. The exploration of nostalgia shows that immigrant protagonists' nostalgic vantage point is constructed by a present that is invariably tinged by subjugation and alienation. However, their nostalgia for the idealized homeland articulates efforts to shape a future in which they would be part of the new country. To view one's surrounding nostalgically, as John J. Su explains is "to interpret the present in relation to an inaccessible or lost past. Thus to 'indulge' in nostalgia need not imply an effort to escape present circumstances or to deceive oneself about the past" (4). Hence, to be nostalgic does not mean to be a sentimentalist or an escapist; on the contrary, nostalgia can be an energizing force that generates in the immigrant protagonists the strength to confront the present and to negotiate and renegotiate their identity in hopes of integration. By connecting the past and the present, nostalgia galvanizes the immigrant protagonists to reshape themselves so as to lay claim on their adopted land. Nostalgia in this sense helps not only in identity formation but also initiates the process of continuity. It, no doubt, rises in response to fragmentation and dissatisfaction, but nostalgia certainly elevates self-continuity.

Prior to the extended argument I have made here, nostalgia has been consistently portrayed negatively as a longing that impairs a person from living in the present. It has been viewed as a sickness that makes adjustment or assimilation in the adopted land difficult, if not impossible. And while I concede that nostalgia can be detrimental and can preclude people from living in the present by causing hindrance in the continuation of life (in chapter two, for instance,

I consider that Nestor, the protagonist in Oscar Hijuelos' *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, suffers from a nostalgia for his homeland, Cuba, that makes him incapable of living in the present), I insist that nostalgia can also be instrumental in immigrant social integration and even upward social mobility (as I point out with regard to the Castillo brothers and the other Cuban Americans in the same novel). Maja Horn in her article "Messy Moods: Nostalgia and Other Nagging Feelings in Oscar Hijuelos's *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*" furthers my claim by noting that "[n]ostalgia in this novel cannot be simply equated with an escapist *pastness* [*sic*] that dodges the social reality of Latinos in the United States; it also becomes an effective (and affective) tool for these Cuban American men to move forward at a time when other venues were notoriously foreclosed to Latinos" (502-3). Maja Horn's assertion indeed is helpful in refuting the prevalent tendency of dismissing nostalgia as escapism or "some sort of cop-out" (Wilson 84). Despite the reality of cases like that of Nestor, it would be unwise to adhere to a negative view of nostalgia. Actually in most cases, immigrants who wax nostalgic tend to feel optimistic about their future. Ralph Harper has very rightly said,

[t]here is an intelligent and unintelligent way of handling nostalgia, a way of sickening under it and a way of using it. We are likely to be self-enclosed, too conscious of consciousness to get across the fences of our egoism even by means of nostalgia which hits us hard. We need understanding of its role to support any resolution to use it as a means to an end we need. (105)

My aim throughout this project has been to urge opponents of nostalgia to rethink their views regarding nostalgia and to see the complexity associated with it. This dissertation, hence, calls for a significant revision of many of the scholars' negative attitude towards nostalgia. It also, by extension, calls for a revision of the attitude that immigrant narratives are apolitical. No matter how much nostalgia is rebuked by critics, its prevalence in immigrant literature demands greater acknowledgement and inquiry into the subject. Moreover, the very fact that the theme of

nostalgia continues to be a prominent element in immigrant literature draws attention to the issue that the subject still requires much more importance and exploration. Sean Scanlan has rightly said that nostalgia keeps coming back, but in new forms. Indeed, nostalgia has now acquired a more engaged and critical frame, and “rather than an end reaction to yearning, it is understood as a technique for provoking a secondary reaction” (Scanlan 4). Nostalgia is not just a longing for the past, but it is rather a complex response to numerous social, political, economic, and cultural phenomena that intermingle in the experience of immigrant relocation and social integration. Nostalgia is a historical phenomenon that arises in response to a set of specific cultural, political, and economic forces (Su 4). Thus, nostalgia not only reveals elements of discontent, social exhaustion, lack of power, and a quest for identity but also functions as active critique of the present condition by using the past as a mirror, a mirror that helps in building a future based on stability and continuity. Boym has significantly said that nostalgia can be prospective, “the fantasies of the past, determined by the needs of the present, have a direct impact on the realities of the future” (9).

All these factors make one concur with Jackson Lears who eighteen years ago in an article titled “Looking Backward: In Defense of Nostalgia” wrote that “[m]aybe it’s time to use nostalgia as something more than a mere pejorative” and take it “seriously as an energizing impulse, maybe even a form of knowledge” because “the effort to revalue what has been lost can motivate serious historical inquiry; it can also cast a powerful light on the present. Visions of the good society can come from recollections and reconstructions of the past, not only from fantasies of the future” (66). The vision of good society that Lears talks about can only be materialized when everyone regardless of race, ethnicity, and differences is included in the imaginary community of the United States. The observations regarding nostalgia and immigrant experience

presented in this dissertation are not an end in themselves; rather my dissertation is an invitation to view nostalgia as complex and dynamic state of mind that requires further exploration and therefore encourages continued dialogue on the connection between nostalgia and immigrant narratives.

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